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# The Concept of Authenticity: What It Means to Consumers

Joseph C. Nunes<sup>1</sup>, Andrea Ordanini, and Gaia Giambastiani

## Abstract

The literature is filled with numerous idiosyncratic definitions of what it means for consumption to be authentic. The authors address the resulting conceptual ambiguity by reconceptualizing authenticity, defining it as a holistic consumer assessment determined by six component judgments (accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency) whereby the role of each component can change according to the consumption context. This definition emerges from a two-stage, multimethod concept reconstruction process leveraging data from more than 3,000 consumers across no fewer than 17 types of consumption experiences. In stage one, the authors take a qualitative approach employing both in-depth interviews and surveys (one conducted on a nationally representative sample) to identify authenticity's six constituent components. The final components are based on themes emerging from consumer data that were integrated and reconciled with existing definitions in the literature. In stage two, quantitative analyses empirically estimate the six components and support the composite formative nature of the construct. The authors document how certain components contribute to assessments of authenticity differently across contexts; in addition, they show that authenticity has consumer-relevant downstream consequences while being conceptually distinct from consumer attitudes. Their findings offer practitioners direction regarding what to emphasize to convey authenticity to consumers.

## Keywords

authenticity, consumption, composite construct, concept reconstruction, multimethod

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Consumers crave authenticity—so much so that their quest for authenticity is considered “one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing” (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003, p. 21). This has created an enormous challenge for the field, considering that marketing itself is typically considered inherently inauthentic (Deibert 2017). To overcome consumer cynicism, it has been argued that firms must learn to understand, manage, and excel at rendering authenticity (Gilmore and Pine 2007). The critical question is: how? In an effort to better understand the role of authenticity in consumption, academic research on the topic has flourished in marketing and related fields during the past 20 years. An unintended consequence of this proliferation of research, however, has been the creation of numerous idiosyncratic definitions of what it means to be authentic, some loosely connected to one another and often capturing only a part of a complex phenomenon. What is clear is that “despite widespread agreement about authenticity’s importance as a concept, no commonly accepted definition exists” (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019, p. 25).

The absence of a shared definition of authenticity is due, at least in part, to the fact that historically researchers have tended

to develop definitions expressly for the particular context under investigation, be it advertising (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019; Stern 1994), brands (Holt 2002; Morhart et al. 2015), tourist sites (Grayson and Martinec 2004), reality television (Rose and Wood 2005), classic car ownership (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006), brand extensions (Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012), employee service encounters (Sirianni et al. 2013), creative goods (Valsesia, Nunes, and Ordanini 2016), culture (Vredeveld and Coulter 2018), alcoholic beverages (Beverland 2005), social media influencers (Audrezeta, De Kervilerb, and Moulard 2020), or consumer products such as blue jeans and chocolate (Newman and Dhar 2014).

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In addition, most marketing scholars who define what they mean by “authenticity” have ended up introducing a specific subtype of authenticity to the literature (see Tables A and B in the Web Appendix). This includes, but is not limited to, indexical authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004), hyperauthenticity (Rose and Wood 2005), constructed authenticity (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006), brand extension authenticity (Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012), employee authenticity (Sirianni et al. 2013), brand authenticity (Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley 2014; Morhart et al. 2015; Dwivedi and McDonald 2018; Cinelli and LeBoeuf 2019), creative authenticity (Valsesia, Nunes, and Ordanini 2016), cultural authenticity (Vredendeld and Coulter 2018), and passionate authenticity (Audrezeta, De Kervilerb, and Moulard 2020). In general, the literature provides an insightful yet fragmented picture of what it means for consumption to be authentic. This fragmentation creates problems because when a single term such as “authenticity” acquires a variety of meanings, the inevitable result is conceptual ambiguity (Teas and Palan 1997).

Conceptual ambiguity creates challenges for academics because the lack of shared meaning makes it difficult to develop coherent theory (MacKenzie 2003; Suddaby 2010). What was evident 50 years ago is still true today; progress in consumer behavior research depends on standardized definitions, and this should be a priority for scholars in marketing (Kollat, Engel, and Blackwell 1970). In addition, marketing researchers have made calls for an “increase in the conceptual rigor with which we define our constructs” (Williams and Poehlman 2017, p. 245) and for more attention to be given to “construct validity in general and more rigorous assessments of the measurement properties of constructs” (Jarvis, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2003, p. 199). Conceptual ambiguity also creates challenges for practitioners who would benefit from clearer guidance regarding ways to enhance consumers’ assessments of the authenticity of their offerings.

The goal of this research is to reconceptualize authenticity in marketing such that its definition provides a cohesive, comprehensive understanding of its meaning and specifies the concept’s defining characteristics as well as the extent to which it is generalizable, or at least adaptive, across contexts (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2016). Critically, rather than introducing a new construct, the process followed here is one of concept reconstruction, which entails evaluating the state of the existing concept by reviewing its usage in prior research and using evidence from fieldwork to rework and revise how the construct is defined (Welch, Rumyantseva, and Hewerdine 2016).

### A General Definition of Authenticity

Anticipating our findings, we define authenticity as it pertains to consumption as follows: a holistic consumer assessment determined by six component judgments (accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency) whereby the role of each component can change according to

the consumption context. By placing our definition in the context of consumption, we provide a conceptual understanding of authenticity that is “indigenous” (Rust 2006, p. 2) and “organic” (Kohli 2009, p. 1) to marketing. This definition of authenticity stems from our conceptualization of authenticity as a “composite formative construct,” which is an entity defined entirely by its components (Bollen and Diamantopoulos 2017). The reasoning for conceptualizing authenticity this way is as follows.

First, the rationale underlying why authenticity is conceived of as a *formative* rather than *reflective* construct is straightforward. Consumers make multiple judgments (e.g., Is this original? Is this accurate?) that correspond to the indicators we identify (e.g., originality, accuracy). These judgments are not interchangeable (e.g., originality is not a substitute for accuracy); it is only a combination of these judgments that jointly determines whether consumers consider a consumption experience more or less authentic. When changes in a construct depend on changes in its indicators, as opposed to vice versa, the construct is formative as opposed to reflective (Jarvis, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2003).

Second, authenticity is conceived of as a *composite* rather than *causal* formative construct. As a composite construct, authenticity is defined entirely by its components instead of existing on its own as a latent construct. This means “the indicators, as a group, jointly determine the conceptual and empirical meaning of the construct” (Jarvis, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2003, p. 201) rather than simply providing a way of gauging the degree to which it is present (Bollen and Diamantopoulos 2017). This is consistent with “authenticity” linguistically being a “dimension word,” its specific meaning uncertain until one knows which of its dimensions are being discussed (Dutton 2003). The critical point is that, for consumers, authenticity derives its full meaning from its dimensions. In fact, when they describe what makes something authentic, they do so only through some combination of the six components we identify. An example of a composite formative construct in marketing is brand equity (Aaker 1991), a construct made up of brand awareness, brand associations, brand quality, brand loyalty, and other proprietary assets (Henseler 2017).

The fact that composite indicators can consist of dissimilar variables that do not need to have “conceptual unity” (i.e., direct correspondence) except in the loosest sense of the word (Bollen and Bauldry 2011) has two implications for our conceptualization. First, composite indicators need not covary, allowing for potential trade-offs between them (e.g., originality entails deviating from the mainstream, while legitimacy entails adhering to certain standards or norms). Second, composite indicators can contribute differently in different contexts (e.g., proficiency may be more important when assessing the authenticity of hedonic products than utilitarian products). Thus, our approach helps explain and integrate the fragmented literature in which researchers frequently have selected one or more components of authenticity to investigate separately in different contexts.

**Table 1.** Overview of Qualitative Studies.

	<b>Study 1 Music Consumers</b>	<b>Study 2a Representative Sample</b>	<b>Study 2b Executives</b>
Sampling	Relevant	Representative	Emergent
Context(s)	Single, purposeful (music)	Multiple, theory-driven (e.g., craft beer, metro rides)	Multiple, self-generated (e.g., yoga classes, handbags)
Sample size	Small (N = 30)	Large (N = 1,011)	Small (N = 73)
Method	In-depth interviews	Survey, defined scenarios	Survey, open-ended, discussion
Data	Low breadth, high depth	High breadth, low depth	Medium breadth, medium depth
Purpose(s)	Preliminary identification of themes	Generalizability of themes across multiple theory-driven contexts and consumers	Generalizability of themes to broader set of consumption contexts

**Table 2.** Components of Authenticity.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Definition</b>
1. Accuracy	The extent to which a provider is perceived as transparent in how it represents itself and its products and/or services and, thus, reliable in terms of what it conveys to customers.
2. Connectedness	The extent to which a customer feels engaged, familiar with, and sometimes even transformed by a source and/or its offering.
3. Integrity	The extent to which a provider is perceived as being intrinsically motivated, not acting out of its own financial interest, while acting autonomously and consistently over time.
4. Legitimacy	The extent to which a product or service adheres to shared norms, standards, rules, or traditions present in the market.
5. Originality	The extent to which a product or service stands out from mainstream offerings present in the market and does so without unnecessary embellishments.
6. Proficiency	The extent to which a provider is perceived as properly skilled, exhibiting craftsmanship and/or expertise.

### Methodological Approach

Our approach to conceptualizing authenticity does not entail defining a new construct per se, but instead entails concept reconstruction leading to the redefinition of an existing construct (Welch, Rumyantseva, and Hewerdine 2016). Concept reconstruction is founded on the idea that, as building blocks of theory, concepts need to be tested, challenged, and revised to ensure clarity and consistency as the number of varied interpretations accumulate (Blumer 1969). The reconstruction process commences with a critical review of the concept's use in existing research. Therefore, we begin by identifying how authors have defined authenticity in the past, which reveals a range of meanings and little effort directed at pinpointing commonalities or ensuring consistency.

Next, successful concept reconstruction is predicated on taking a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This means the concept is subjected to scrutiny through qualitative fieldwork examining data collected directly from consumers applying the concept within various empirical instances of the phenomenon (Blumer 1969). Thus, in stage one, we let consumers themselves describe how they form their assessments of authenticity, doing so across a wide variety of consumption contexts. We collected data across three qualitative studies. In Study 1 we conducted in-depth interviews focusing on a single relevant domain (music). In Study 2a, we conducted a survey of a nationally representative sample of consumers focusing on a variety of theory-driven consumption contexts. These contexts differ in the nature of the offering

(product vs. service), its main consumption benefit (hedonic vs. utilitarian), the life cycle of the products (consumable vs. durable), and the extent of consumers' cocreation of value in the services (high vs. low coproduction). In Study 2b, we surveyed a more homogeneous sample whereby respondents self-generated the consumption contexts (included in the Web Appendix). Table 1 presents an overview of how these studies are distinct, yet complementary; the diversity in data collection methods is key to ensuring meaningful and robust results. The final step in stage one involves reconciling the themes drawn from consumer data, used to identify the component indicators that define authenticity, with themes drawn from existing definitions in the literature. Doing so marries evidence from fieldwork with existing theory about what it means for consumption to be authentic and provides the main conceptual outcome of the reconstruction process: the final set of authenticity's constituent components and their definitions (see Table 2).

In stage two, we augment stage one with a quantitative analysis in which we investigate the applicability of the component indicators identified across a variety of consumption contexts. We do so by using a scenario-based study that includes the same theory-driven variation in consumption contexts as Study 2a. Using partial least squares (PLS) modeling (Hair, Howard, and Nitzl 2020), we estimate authenticity as a composite formative construct, while documenting heterogeneity across contexts among select component indicators in terms of their impact on consumers' overall assessments. The data also allow us to investigate a broader nomological network

that documents the effect of consumers' assessments of authenticity on downstream consequences relevant to marketers.

In summary, with very few exceptions (e.g., Williams and Poehlman 2017), little work in marketing of which we are aware engages in a systematic process of concept reconstruction. Against this backdrop, we employ a unique process that takes a two-stage multimethod (qualitative and quantitative) approach, leveraging responses from more than 3,000 consumers across 17 theoretically driven, and nearly 200 self-generated, consumption experiences.

### *Summary of Main Findings*

To anticipate the outcome of our endeavor, the fieldwork in stage one facilitates identifying six components of authenticity. As mentioned previously, these include accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency. Accuracy refers to being transparent and reliable in what is conveyed to consumers. Connectedness describes feelings of engagement and at times a sense of transformation. Integrity means the source is intrinsically motivated, while acting autonomously and consistently. Legitimacy refers to conformity in terms of adhering to norms, standards, rules or traditions, while originality refers to a product or service standing out from the mainstream. Finally, proficiency refers to the display of skills, craftsmanship and/or expertise in the offering. We defined these components when reconciling our consumer data with the existing literature (see Table 2 and Figure 1), and they help clarify and structure the diverse themes collected from definitions in the extant literature (see Table A in the Web Appendix).

Stage two provides empirical estimates of the six component indicators identified as contributing to consumers' assessments of authenticity across a wide range of consumption contexts, including some studied previously in the literature (e.g., chocolates, restaurants) and some that, at first glance, seem to be unlikely candidates for studying authenticity (e.g., washing machines, utility services). We find that when assessing authenticity, all six components contribute significantly across contexts, although proficiency routinely appears to be the most important and legitimacy the least important. In addition, judgments of proficiency appear more important for hedonic than utilitarian products, while judgments of legitimacy appear to matter for utilitarian but not hedonic products. It also appears integrity matters more for durable products than for consumable products. Turning to services, originality matters more for low- than for high-consumer-coproduction services, while conversely, legitimacy matters more for high- than for low-coproduction services. The results also show how authenticity relates to individuals' consumption intentions, as it is associated with information search, purchase intentions, and word of mouth, with consumer attitudes partially mediating this association. Notably, tests of discriminant validity support authenticity and attitudes as distinct constructs.

These findings are important for academics as they support conceptualizing authenticity as a composite formative

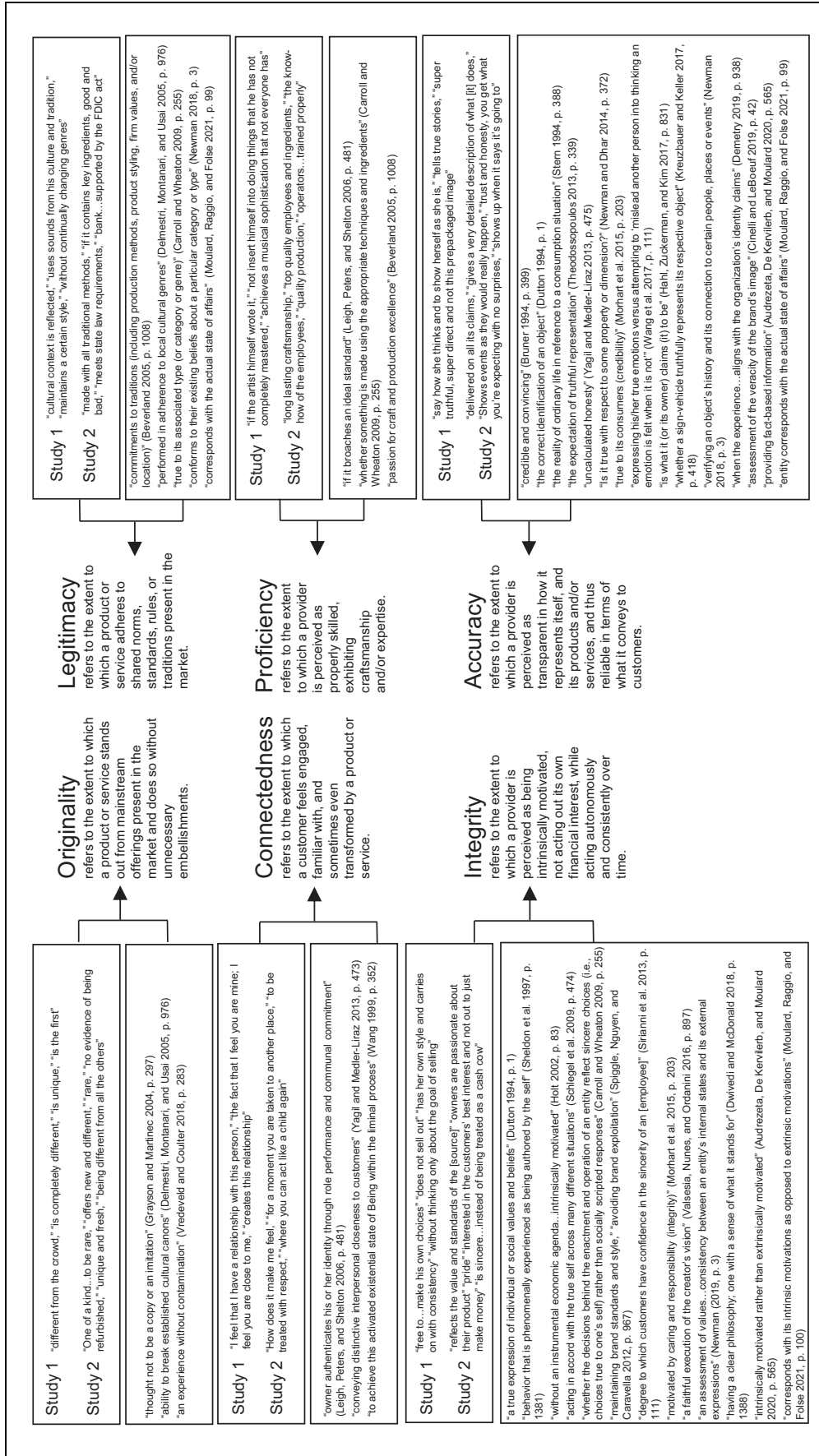
construct with its constituent components contributing differently across different contexts. Conceptualizing authenticity in this way helps connect and make sense of the numerous idiosyncratic definitions in the literature. Knowing how different component judgments apply in different contexts is also important for practitioners who benefit from guidance about what to emphasize for different types of offerings to render authentic experiences.

### **The Literature on Authenticity**

As a first step in our conceptual reconstruction effort, we conducted a comprehensive review of the literature examining how authenticity has been defined in the past as it relates to consumption. Unlike a typical literature review, our goal here is to identify those characteristics of authenticity that prior researchers have considered essential, something that should be specified in any concept definition (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2016). The search for definitions involved collecting all articles including the words "authenticity" and/or "authentic" in the title, abstract, or as a keyword in the top 25 marketing journals as well as the top journals of related fields including management, organization, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (the Web Appendix provides details of the procedure we followed). This resulted in 436 articles from 61 journals (see Table C in the Web Appendix), including 153 (35%) from marketing. We further expanded our bibliographic search to include articles and books that were well cited in the articles collected. We scoured these articles for explicit and distinct definitions of what the authors meant when using the words "authenticity" or "authentic." Articles with definitions too far removed from consumers or tangential to consumption were excluded (e.g., articles examining authentic leadership, authentic emotions) as were articles that provided definitions taken directly from prior work already identified.

At the end of this process, we identified 63 distinct definitions from 46 different articles (see Table A in the Web Appendix). Forty-five of these definitions (71%) introduce specific subtypes of authenticity (e.g., "constructed authenticity," "moral authenticity") instead of defining authenticity more generally (see Table B in the Web Appendix). Within the marketing literature, 23 of 28 definitions (82%) were of subtypes. Put another way, only five articles in marketing (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Holt 2002; Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021; Newman and Dhar 2014; Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley 2014) attempted to define what it means to be authentic in a general sense.

If we look more closely at these five articles, we find Holt's (2002, p. 83) work on consumer culture and branding claims that to be authentic, brands must "be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value." Beverland and Farrelly (2010, p. 839) are more general, concluding that "despite the multiplicity of terms and interpretations applied to authenticity, ultimately authenticity



**Figure 1. Convergence between definitions based on qualitative studies and core elements of definitions from prior literature.**

encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true” with each synonym left to the reader to interpret. Moulard, Raggio, and Folse (2021, p. 99) focus on truth and define authenticity as “the degree to which an entity in one’s environment (e.g., object, person, performance) is perceived to be true to or match up with something else.” Newman and Dhar (2014, p. 372) consider the act and not the outcome, stating that “authenticity describes a verification process—the evaluation of some truth or fact.” In contrast, Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley (2014, p. 194) focus on individuals and not artifacts to “define authenticity as the degree to which personal identity is causally linked to individual behavior.” It is interesting to note that while all of these are put forth as “general” definitions, each raises distinct features, and only a few loosely align with each other.

Surveying the full set of articles that we compiled, several key insights emerge. First, only about 11% of the 436 articles we identify as expressly involving authenticity provide what could be considered a definition, and fewer still utilize a single definition taken from prior literature. Instead, the vast majority either summarize how prior literature has varied in its interpretation of authenticity’s meaning or presume the meaning of authenticity is understood. Second, most authors, when they do provide a definition, do so for a specialized subtype of authenticity that they create. Yet even researchers who label subtypes similarly (e.g., brand authenticity) tend to define them somewhat differently. For example, consider brand authenticity. Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2019, p. 42) “conceptualize brand authenticity as a judgment about the genuineness of a brand’s image” while Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley (2014, p. 193) claim “an authentic brand is clear about what it stands for. It is a brand which positions itself from the inside out versus one that panders to the latest trend.” Morhart et al. (2015, p. 203) go further, conceptualizing perceived brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct that includes the extent to which a brand is “true to its consumers” (similar to Cinelli and LeBoeuf) as one of four dimensions, and the extent to which “consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself” (more similar to Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley) as another dimension. Overall, the key takeaway is that the literature presents an important but fragmented picture of what it means for consumption to be authentic. The evidence of conceptual ambiguity makes authenticity ripe for concept reconstruction, prompting the qualitative fieldwork we undertake to understand how consumers themselves interpret the concept.

## Stage One: Grounded Theory Fieldwork—A Consumer’s View of Authenticity

### Study 1: Identification of Conceptual Themes

The fieldwork in Study 1 examines consumers’ interpretation of the meaning of authenticity using a critical case sampling method involving in-depth interviews. A critical case reflects a context that is particularly important because it permits logical generalization and maximum application of the information to other cases because “if it happens there, it will happen anywhere”

(Patton 2015, p. 174). Music is especially well-suited as a critical case study because authenticity is a dominant topic studied extensively in this domain (Grazian 2004; McLeod 1999; Peterson 1997). Moreover, claims of being authentic play a major role in how music is marketed (Barker and Taylor 2007). In an effort to be methodical in capturing how consumers describe what makes the consumption of music authentic, we employed the repertory grid technique (RGT) to collect and analyze the data (Goffin and Koners 2011). The RGT is a cognitive mapping tool that has been utilized widely in consumer research, including successfully being employed to discover how consumers construct the concept of “customer experience quality” (Lemke, Clark, and Wilson 2011). Its elicitation procedure is particularly useful for explaining abstract terms from the point of view of respondents.

**Method.** We selected 30 respondents prescreened for an interest in music to participate as informants. They varied in gender (50% female), age (50% under 30), and nationality (22 European, eight non-European). Informants were assigned to one of two interviewers. Each interview was conducted on an individual basis. During the initial elicitation stage, each informant provided a set of five artists whose music they felt particularly well-informed about. Of the 150 artists provided, 126 were unique (see Table D in the Web Appendix).

At the onset, we asked each informant to identify features important to them when they evaluate the artists and their output. For each informant, authenticity emerged as a relevant feature, reaffirming the concept’s importance in the domain under investigation. Next, informants were presented with various combinations of three artists drawn from those they provided and were asked to identify ways in which the music of two is similar yet different from the third in terms of authenticity. The same procedure was applied using a common set of five artists popular at the time (Beyoncé, Pink, Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, and Enrique Iglesias), pretested to ensure heterogeneity in terms of assessments of authenticity (see “Study 1 Artist Pretest” details in the Web Appendix).

**Raw descriptors.** The resulting discussions produced a total of 225 meaningful descriptors (e.g., “follow their own style,” “lyrics are introspective and personal”) used to create opposing construct/contrast poles on a five-point bipolar scale in line with the RGT methodology. One scale, for example, was anchored by “follow their own style” and “follow current trends” (informant #18). Figure A in the Web Appendix includes a sample repertory grid of construct/contrast poles generated by a single informant (informant #10) for illustrative purposes. Using their own self-generated construct/contrast poles (which represent our elementary data), informants rated the work of the five artists they provided as well as the common set of five artists.

**Results.** From the 225 construct/contrast poles, after a series of thorough coding and refinement efforts, we identified 243 themes associated with the meaning of authenticity in music.

No systematic differences in terms of counts or types of themes emerged based on gender, age, or nationality. Using an approach to inductive research rooted in the literature (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2012), after a series of iterations and interpretation efforts, similar clusters of themes emerged that were grouped into six different categories. These six reflect the preliminary list of authenticity component judgments. These components (ultimately labeled accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency) reflect the conceptual dimensions informants expressed when assessing the authenticity of an artist and their music. Table E in the Web Appendix provides a sample of themes derived from the construct/contrast poles and categorized within the different component judgments. Table F in the Web Appendix presents excerpts of what some respondents said makes music authentic, aligned with each of the six components.

Eliminating redundancies at the individual level, the 243 themes and their associated component judgment were reduced to 117 unique instantiations used to calculate counts at the informant level. While two informants did not raise any relevant themes/components, among the remaining 28 the component judgments raised by the greatest number of informants was integrity (86%), followed by originality (82%), connectedness (71%), proficiency (68%), accuracy (64%), and legitimacy (46%). It is important to highlight a few things about the six components identified.

First, inspecting the results more closely, there appears to be significant breadth in terms of what drives consumers' assessments of authenticity at the individual level. Informants did not simply use descriptors that were synonyms or different ways of representing the same thing. Instead, they point to different themes and ultimately different components of a broader concept. For example, one informant described authentic experiences as those produced by artists who "have the ability to create something new" (originality), "engage with fans" (connectedness), "write their own songs" (proficiency), and "are free to choose what to sing" (integrity). Another informant spoke of artists who "talk about what they have really experienced" (accuracy), have "respect for traditions and styles of a certain genre" (legitimacy), "are unique" (originality), "are consistent" (integrity), and "show a desire to have a dialogue with the listener" (connectedness). This breadth in dimensions that are not substitutes for one another is consistent with authenticity being a formative as opposed to a reflective construct.

Second, informants discussed authenticity as a multidimensional concept. More specifically, no informant described just one type of component judgment ("component" hereinafter). Among the 28 who raised relevant themes, only one person brought up themes associated with just two components, while 21% of respondents raised three, 39% four, 25% five, and 11% discussed all six. Further, we emphasize that informants did not describe what makes music authentic in ways unrelated to its components. No informant presented a single, rudimentary description; instead, they raised specific dimensions (components) of the concept consistent with authenticity being a

"dimension word," its meaning depending on those dimensions discussed. This is indicative of how assessments of authenticity depend on a set of distinct judgments in the minds of consumers. This is compelling initial evidence that authenticity is a complex, composite construct that should be defined with "each dimension representing a unique content domain of the broader construct" (Polites, Roberts, and Thatcher 2011, p. 1). Taken together, these results are indicative of the formative composite nature of authenticity as a construct.

**Preliminary content validity assessment.** Recall that we ran a separate pretest that measured the perceived authenticity of the music of five common artists presented to respondents. We also had each informant rate these artists on their own set of five-point bipolar scales. We then ran a multidimensional scaling analysis using the average score at the component level for the music of each artist on the full set (Beyoncé, Pink, etc.) derived from these ratings (see Table G in the Web Appendix). Results reveal that artists' authenticity, measured as a composite score of respondents' evaluations, is in line with the evaluations these artists received in the pretest (see the horizontal positioning of the artists in Figure B in the Web Appendix). This provides initial support for the content validity of our findings. Moreover, some artists reached a similar level of authenticity with different contributions from the six component judgments. For example, Beyoncé and Pink received similarly high authenticity scores—the former due mainly to high levels of connectedness and integrity, the latter due to a high level of originality (see the vertical positioning of artists and components in Web Appendix Figure B). This suggests that the six themes are dissimilar in the way they contribute to consumers' assessments of authenticity, providing further support for the composite nature of the construct.

In summary, in Study 1 we identify six component judgments related to authenticity in music that define it as a concept in the minds of consumers. The results suggest that authenticity is a collection of judgments consumers make that capture different dimensions of the concept, providing preliminary evidence that authenticity is a composite formative construct. Recall that our concept reconstruction process is intended to incorporate consumer data collected using different qualitative methods (see Table 1), involving different populations of consumers, and covering a wide range of consumption contexts. In the next study, we broaden our inquiry substantially on all three fronts.

### ***Study 2a: Evidence of Generalizability and Heterogeneity: A Nationally Representative Sample***

Study 2a builds on the results of Study 1 in three important ways. First, the method we employ has changed. In lieu of in-depth interviews, we survey consumers. Second, we expand and extend the sample significantly. We enlisted a nationally representative sample of consumers to ensure that we capture the views of a broad cross-section of the population, increasing the generalizability of our findings. Third, whereas Study 1 focuses exclusively on music, in Study 2a we include a wide



**Table 3.** Specific Consumption Contexts of Study 2a and Study 3.

Study 2a							
Product				Service			
Hedonic		Utilitarian		Hedonic		Utilitarian	
Durable	Consumable	Durable	Consumable	High Coproduction	Low Coproduction	High Coproduction	Low Coproduction
Sports car	Craft beer	Vacuum cleaner	Laundry detergent	Toy store	Movie	Banking services	Train/metro ride
Study 3							
Product				Service			
Hedonic		Utilitarian		Hedonic		Utilitarian	
Durable	Consumable	Durable	Consumable	High Coproduction	Low Coproduction	High Coproduction	Low Coproduction
Gaming console	Chocolates	Washing machine	Toilet paper	Restaurant dining	Sporting event	Health services	Utility services

variety of theoretically driven consumption contexts. This helps address potential limitations inherent in a single case-study approach (see Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009) and allows us to consider the extent to which consumer judgments might change across contexts.

**Consumption contexts.** One theory-driven distinction in contexts we draw is between products and services. This dichotomy is important because marketing exchanges that do not result in a transfer of ownership from seller to buyer (services) are fundamentally different from those that do (products) (Lovelock and Gummesson 2004). Further, services differ from products in terms of other characteristics, including tangibility, perishability, the simultaneity of production and consumption, and the relative uniformity of consumers' experiences (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). These differences necessitate distinct consumer evaluation processes, which may lead to differences in what consumers emphasize when assessing authenticity.

Another theory-driven distinction we draw is between hedonic and utilitarian offerings. Hedonic offerings are characterized by an affective and sensory experience of pleasure and fun, whereas utilitarian offerings are more cognitively driven, instrumental, and goal-oriented, helping the consumer accomplish a functional or practical task (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Hedonic and utilitarian motives comprise the "two basic reasons" consumers purchase products and services: (1) the affective gratification from sensory attributes and (2) instrumental reasons concerned with expectations of consequences (Batra and Ahtola 1991). We anticipate that these different motives might also lead to differences in how consumers form their assessments of authenticity. Further, we distinguish between products on the basis of differences in their life cycle (durable vs. consumable). We also distinguish

between services in line with the extent to which consumers typically contribute to the coproduction of the service experience (high vs. low coproduction; see Yim, Chan, and Lam 2012).

## Design

**Stimuli.** Leveraging these distinctions enables us to investigate how authenticity is thought of across several meaningful consumption contexts: hedonic products, hedonic services, utilitarian products, utilitarian services, consumable products, durable products, high-coproduction services, and low-coproduction services (see Table 3). We arrived at the specific experiences used in each context drawing on the results of a pretest that ensured that they differed significantly on all dimensions (for details, see "Study 2a Consumption Context Pretest" in the Web Appendix).

**Sample and data.** We recruited a sample of 1,011 U.S. citizens certified as nationally representative in terms of gender (52% female), age ( $M_{\text{age}} = 45$  years), education, and ethnicity through Qualtrics International. Each respondent was presented with four products and/or services drawn randomly from the set and was asked to express, in their own words, the criteria they would use when forming a judgment of authenticity. Next, they were asked to describe a highly authentic experience of that particular product or service category (e.g., a sports car, a toy store). This resulted in a total of 4,044 statements, of which 3,955 (98%) were interpretable. Of these, 1,513 (37%) provided sound descriptors considered useful in terms of developing themes regarding authenticity. Statements considered nonuseful were categorized as such for multiple reasons. Consider the context of a sports car used in this study. Examples of nonuseful statements include those that are overly broad ("great features"), focus on individual preferences ("they are

way too fast”), and identify specific examples instead of general criteria (e.g., “a Dodge Challenger”). Simply put, nonuseful responses fail to provide a solid-enough basis on which authenticity could or would be assessed. By avoiding making inferences based on ambiguous descriptors, we believe our conservative approach leads to results that are more robust.

In coding the data, we developed and refined a coding scheme in line with conventional grounded theory by “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing” the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Each author individually read each response line by line in an attempt to identify key words or phrases belonging to, representing, or being an example of a more general meaning (Spiggle 1994). The sizable amount of entries required several rounds of coding. Initially, all three authors coded the first 100 entries with the goal of identifying interpretational alignment. After conferring to resolve discrepancies in coding, each author separately coded the remaining entries. As coding progressed, each entry was compared with other entries appearing to belong to the same category to identify similar patterns of responses (Martin and Turner 1986).

The coding procedure began initially by drawing from the themes and six components identified in Study 1, which were considered provisional, allowing for new themes and dimensions (components) to emerge. The 1,512 useful responses ultimately included 1,917 themes (23% of descriptions included more than one theme). Table H of the Web Appendix presents illustrative verbiage associated with each component in each context. We then calculated the reliability of our coding using the proportional reduction in loss approach (Rust and Cooil 1994), which involves the calculation of an overall proportion of interjudge agreement. Across consumption contexts, the interjudge reliability score ranged from .69 to .80, corresponding to an alpha of .92 to .97. After confirming reliability, we resolved all remaining inconsistencies through discussion.

**Results.** In the end, we were able to categorize all 1,917 themes into a clearer and enriched version of the six components identified in Study 1. We did not find evidence that supported adding new components, despite the diverse sample population and varied contexts, thus corroborating the findings from the critical case approach. We want to highlight that respondents’ descriptions were distributed fairly evenly across components as follows: accuracy (20%), connectedness (15%), integrity (12%), legitimacy (20%), originality (16%), and proficiency (17%). Despite the nature of the study, which encouraged short responses, nearly one in four of the useful statements included more than one theme. Notably, as in Study 1, respondents did not provide a single, rudimentary description of what would make a particular product or service category experience authentic. Instead, they raised specific dimensions (components) of the concept consistent with authenticity’s meaning depending on the dimension(s) discussed. This, again, is consistent with authenticity emerging as a composite formative construct. Importantly, we find evidence for all six components in

each consumption context provided, although some components appear to matter more in some contexts than others (e.g., accuracy was raised in 31% of descriptions for banking services, but only 8% for craft beer, while originality was raised in 36% of descriptions for craft beer, but only 3% for banking services). This type of variability across contexts prompted the additional investigation into heterogeneity we conduct in Study 3. We did not observe systematic differences in components based on gender or age, although integrity was raised somewhat more often by younger respondents.

In a separate study (Study 2b, included in the Web Appendix for brevity), we expanded the set of consumption contexts even further by asking 73 executives working on a master of business administration degree at a major business school to identify those types of experiences in which they see authenticity applying. This encouraged respondents to focus on the most accessible authentic experiences in memory. This was intended to ensure that our reconceptualization effort was not limited to evidence gathered only from predefined experiences in terms of context. Participants were then asked to list specific qualities of those experiences that contribute to making it more or less authentic. Respondents provided 192 distinct consumption experiences, ranging from “do it yourself” items purchased on Etsy to taking a yoga class, which were accompanied by a description of one or more qualities that impacted their perceptions of authenticity. The authors examined each description to determine whether any part aligned with the themes associated with one or more of the six components identified in Studies 1 and 2a. As in Study 2a, each author was also receptive to identifying any new themes or components observed in the data. From the 192 descriptions, we identified 234 descriptors that were categorized into themes and subsequently into one of the six components that emerged in Study 1 and were corroborated in Study 2a. Again, no evidence of new components surfaced from the data.

Integrating themes from Studies 1 and 2a (2b) and reconciling them with the extant literature forms the basis for the definitions of the six constituent components of authenticity (see Table 2). The key takeaway thus far is that, regardless of the method employed, the same six component judgments consistently seem to jointly determine consumers’ assessments of authenticity. Next, in the final step in the process of concept reconstruction, we look for convergence among the themes identified in our qualitative studies and themes present in the prior literature.

## Reconciling Previous Literature with Grounded Evidence

Reconciling the findings from our consumer data with themes already present in prior literature is the final step in deriving precise definitions for the six components to form a holistic, general concept of authenticity as it pertains to consumption (see Figure 1). Moreover, consistent with the goal of concept reconstruction, it helps make sense of the existing fragmented

knowledge on the topic by providing a conceptual scheme (our set of six component indicators) that can accommodate and integrate the disparate perspectives in the authenticity literature.

Here, we briefly summarize our reconciliation effort. Consider the originality component. The definition we propose integrates what consumers reported in stage one and converges with themes drawn from definitions of authenticity from prior literature. Consumers describe authentic experiences as those judged to be “unique,” “different from the crowd,” and “new and different” (for illustrative consumer quotes associated with each of the six components, see Tables F and H in the Web Appendix). Consumers also point out that distinguishing factors should involve the essence of an experience, free from unnecessary embellishments. These descriptors are consistent with descriptors derived from different definitions in the extant literature, such as “not being a copy or an imitation” (Grayson and Martinec 2004, p. 297), “breaking cultural canons” (Delmestri, Montanari, and Usai 2005, p. 976), and being “without contamination” (Vredevelde and Coulter 2018, p. 283). A judgment of originality also reflects a common view in the literature that assessments of authenticity involve comparisons with reference points that exist within space and time (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021).

Similarly, consumers describe authentic experiences as those that adhere to some shared norms, standards, rules, or traditions present in the marketplace, which constitutes our definition of the component of legitimacy. They said things such as “I would look at safety standards,” the extent to which it “meets state law requirements,” and uses “all traditional methods.” Similar ideas have emerged in prior literature and have been described as “commitments to tradition” (Beverland 2005, p. 1008), being “true to its associated type (or category or genre)” (Carroll and Wheaton 2009, p. 255), and corresponding “with a socially determined standard” (Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021, p. 99). This component judgment of legitimacy, like originality, requires a comparison to external referents. Yet in contrast to originality, the central idea of legitimacy is compliance. As mentioned previously, consumer judgments of authenticity may depend on cues that create tension, for example, between conformity (legitimacy) and nonconformity (originality). This tension is made apparent in research by Corciolani, Grayson, and Humphreys (2020) that highlights how music critics prioritize one of two subtypes of authenticity proposed by Carroll and Wheaton (2009). In their analysis of *Rolling Stone* music reviews, they find that critics with lower cultural capital (domain-specific knowledge) prioritize adherence to expectations (i.e., type authenticity), whereas critics with more cultural capital prioritize the inherent motivation (i.e., moral authenticity) that often results in greater originality. Defining authenticity as a composite formative construct allows for different components (legitimacy, integrity, and originality, in this case) to have independent effects on assessments of authenticity. This reinforces the decision to conceptualize authenticity as a composite construct, as we do.

Another component judgment that emerges from the qualitative data is accuracy, defined as describing the extent to which a source is transparent in how it represents itself, while what is conveyed to consumers is reliable. Consumers describe authentic experiences as “delivering on all its claims,” “super truthful, super direct,” and getting “what you’re expecting with no surprises.” This meaning has historical roots in philosophy, with French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) arguing that to be authentic, one must be transparent (Guignon 2004, p. 30). In line with this interpretation, prior literature has described something authentic as that which is “true” (e.g., Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Morhart et al. 2015; Theodossopoulos 2013), “credible and convincing” (Bruner 1994, p. 399), exhibiting “uncalculated honesty” (Yagil and Medler-Liraz 2013, p. 475), being verifiable (Newman 2019), “providing fact-based information” (Audrezeta, De Kervilerb, and Moulard 2020, p. 565), and communication matching “the actual state of affairs” (Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021, p. 99). Like Rousseau, Lehman et al. (2019, p. 2) discuss a “consistency between an entity’s internal values and its external expression.” It is critical, we believe, to distinguish between being true to others, what we label “accuracy,” and being true to oneself, which is captured in what we call “integrity.”

We define integrity as the source of a consumption experience being perceived as intrinsically motivated and not acting out of one’s own financial interest, while behaving autonomously and consistently over time. Here consumers describe a source being “free” to make its own choices, “not selling out,” and “passionate” about its endeavors. Related meanings in the literature include authenticity being an “assessment of values” (Newman 2019, p. 3), and the notions of being “intrinsically motivated” as opposed to “extrinsically motivated” (Audrezeta, De Kervilerb, and Moulard 2020, p. 565, Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021, p. 100), and acting “without an instrumental economic agenda” (Holt 2002, p. 83). Trilling (1972) characterizes authenticity as staying “true to oneself” to distinguish it from sincerity. These themes are, not surprisingly, raised in the literature frequently (see Figure 1), as they have direct ties to the etymology of the word. The Greek word *authentēo* is often translated as “to have full power” or “acting on one’s own authority” in the sense of autonomy (Pederson 2015, p. 48).

Another component referencing a quality of the source in assessing authenticity is proficiency, which we define as being properly skilled and exhibiting craftsmanship and/or expertise. Consumers referred to “quality production,” employee “know-how,” “mastery,” “sophistication,” and top-quality “employees and ingredients” as criteria they frequently use when assessing authenticity. Similar themes in the extant literature have included “using the appropriate techniques” (Carroll and Wheaton 2009, p. 255) and “passion for craft and production excellence” (Beverland 2005, p. 1008). Note the latter author may be seen as conflating passion, indicative of the source’s values, with excellence in execution. We disentangle these ideas by separating integrity (motives) from proficiency (abilities). There is also a subtle distinction between

legitimacy, which addresses whether the source adheres to prevailing standards, and proficiency, which addresses the use of “appropriate techniques” (Carroll and Wheaton 2009, p. 255). What are “appropriate techniques”? Here, again, one might also observe consistency between the component judgments or tension, depending on the consumption context.

Finally, the component of connectedness is something that emerged quite emphatically among consumers in terms of a sense of intimacy, psychological and physical closeness, and, at times, a feeling of transformation. Consumers referenced feelings of “having a relationship” with the source, and sometimes feelings of “transcendence,” as in “being taken to another place.” This relates to another specific theme in the literature, albeit from a different vantage point, that of “interpersonal closeness with the customer” (Yagil and Medler-Liraz 2013, p. 473). Connectedness may also be linked to what has been described as “intrapersonal authenticity” (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006, p. 483), involving “both physical (i.e., relaxation, reinvigoration) and psychological (i.e., self-discovery, self-realization) aspects.” In one sense, connectedness would seem to contribute to what has been referred to as “self-authenticating experiences” (Arnould and Price 2000).

Reconciling themes from the consumer data with prior literature (Figure 1) reinforces the conclusion that the things that make a consumption experience authentic are jointly determined by a variety of distinct and loosely related judgments. These judgments constitute the component indicators of authenticity in our proposed composite construct. By describing how the six constituent components of authenticity integrate several disparate themes currently present in the literature, we are able to take stock of, digest, and synthesize the literature on authenticity in a way that allows consumer researchers to see the forest for the trees (MacInnis 2011). In the next stage, we provide an empirical investigation of our conceptualization of authenticity as well as a broader framework in which consumer assessments of authenticity have important downstream consequences for marketing.

## Stage Two: Quantitative Analysis—Concept Structure and Heterogeneity

### Study 3: Validating the Reconstructed Concept of Authenticity Across Consumption Contexts

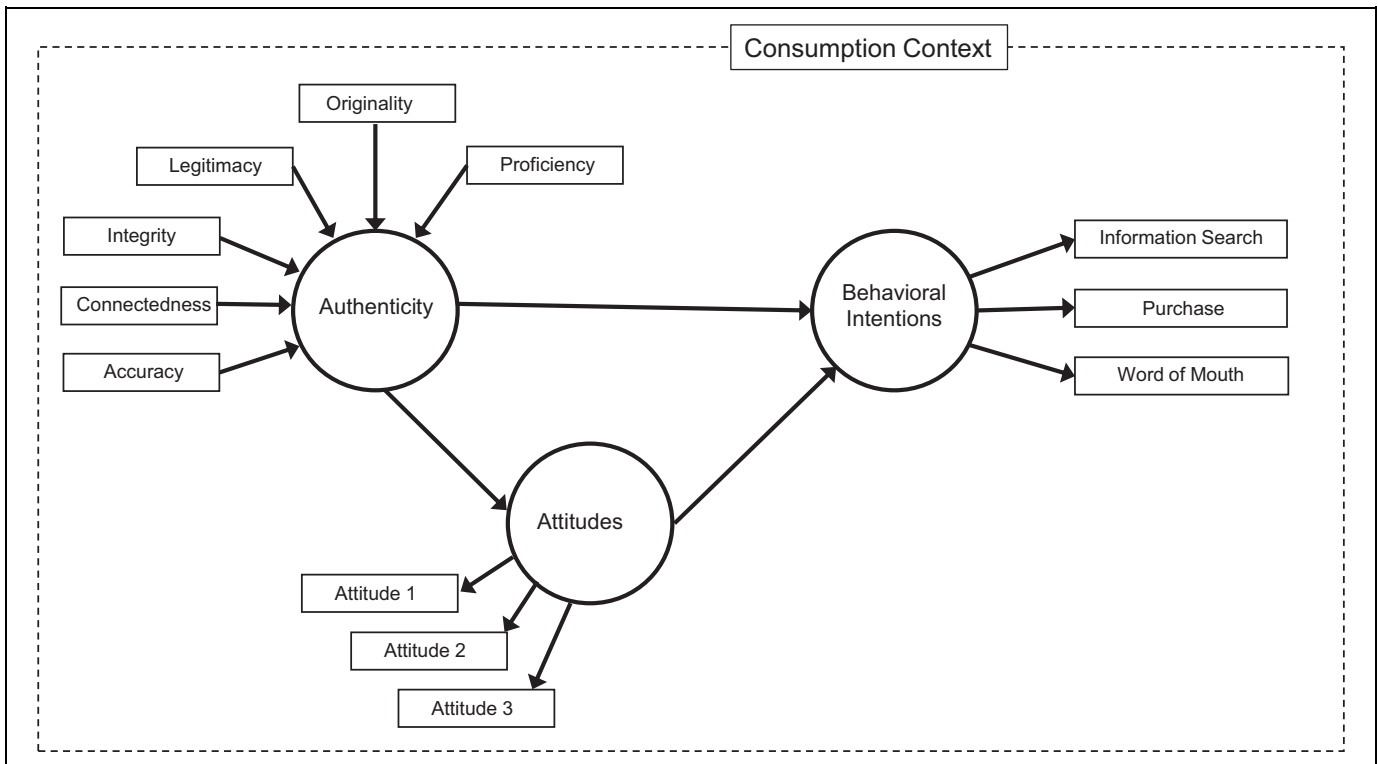
Study 3 accomplishes three things. First, it validates the set of six components identified in stage one as composite indicators of authenticity, doing so across different consumption contexts. Second, it documents heterogeneity in the roles played by different components. Evidence of heterogeneity is important theoretically, as it helps explain the fragmentation observed in the literature. It is also important practically, as it provides managers an indication of different “routes” to follow in marketing for different products and services that deliver authentic consumption experiences. Finally, Study 3 documents how consumers’ assessments of authenticity have important downstream consequences while showing that authenticity is conceptually

distinct from, albeit associated with, consumers’ attitudes toward an offering.

**Design.** As in Study 2a, we created different scenarios that varied the nature of the consumption experience (product vs. service), the main consumption benefit (hedonic vs. utilitarian), the life cycle for products (consumable vs. durable), and the extent of consumer cocreation of value for services (high vs. low coproduction). Note that life cycle and value cocreation are nested, and the design is not fully orthogonal. The specific experiences employed were derived from the results of two pretests: the first designed to elicit exemplars of hedonic and utilitarian products and experiences and the second to ensure they differed significantly on all dimensions of interest (details of both pretests are in the Web Appendix). Table 3 provides the specific experiences employed in each context. This study, though exploratory in nature, was preregistered on AsPredicted.org (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=7wa87v>).

**Model.** The proposed model (illustrated in Figure 2) includes the focal construct of Authenticity, measured as a composite of the six formative indicators identified in stage one. Authenticity is expected to affect consumers’ Behavioral Intentions, measured as a reflective construct, both directly and indirectly through Attitudes, also measured as a reflective construct. The model is then estimated across different groups of respondents randomly assigned to one of the eight consumption contexts (see Table 3).

**Method.** Each respondent read what they believed was a review of a consumption experience in which clear evidence of all six components was present. First, respondents reported their overall assessment of the Authenticity of the offering reviewed using direct measures (two items). These measures were taken for instrumental purposes, to conduct the redundancy analysis prescribed as part of the method for evaluating composite formative measurement models in PLS (see Hair, Howard, and Nitzl 2020). Second, they rated the extent to which each of the six component judgments (e.g., originality, accuracy) contributed to their overall assessment of Authenticity (six items). The definition of each was provided. This type of measurement instrument was used to *directly* capture the association between the components and the composite in the minds of respondents. We chose the wording intentionally as a result of the purpose of the study and its concomitant design; the study was intended to validate the structure of the concept and the role of its components, rather than to develop a scale. Moreover, the scenarios provided clear evidence that all six components were present (e.g., in terms of originality each product or service was described as “one-of-a-kind”). We reasoned a priori that asking respondents simply to assess the presence of each component would have resulted in inflated and relatively homogenous ratings. Third, respondents reported their overall Attitude toward the product or service (three items) using conventional measures. Finally, they indicated their Behavioral Intentions with respect to their willingness to seek more information



**Figure 2.** Study 3: the empirical model.

about the offering, purchase the offering, and share information about it via word of mouth (three items). We provide the complete stimuli along with the specific measurement instruments in the Web Appendix.

**Sample.** The target sample was 300 respondents per scenario, which, allowing for exclusions, we predicted to be adequate to ensure a minimum number of quality responses with which to estimate the model. We recruited 2,419 respondents (53% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 35$  years) on Prolific Academic. We excluded 491 respondents (20.3%) who failed an instructional manipulation check (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009), leaving 1,928 usable responses. The number of respondents who failed the manipulation check did not vary across conditions ( $\chi^2(7) = 9.44, p = .22$ ).

**Analysis.** We performed all of the analyses using PLS structural equation modeling in line with the guidelines proposed by Hair et al. (2020) for its use. First and foremost, our modeling approach was motivated by the composite formative nature of our focal construct and the inclusion in the model of both reflective and formative constructs, which PLS can estimate appropriately. Second, our model is exploratory in its investigation of the components of authenticity, which fits with the epistemological premise and underlying features of a model tested using PLS. Third, the data come from scenarios (simulated authentic experiences) in which all cues were intended to signal high levels of authenticity; this led to the data distribution of all six components being left-skewed with limited

variance. Being a nonparametric technique, PLS works well with nonnormal data. We estimated our model using the PLS consistent algorithm, which balances the tendency of PLS to magnify measurement loadings while downplaying structural relations (Dijkstra and Henseler 2015). Notably, the key results and estimates obtained using the consistent PLS algorithm (see Tables 4, 5 and 6) are similar to those obtained applying the traditional PLS analysis. The Web Appendix details further specifics of the PLS implementation.

### Measurement Validity

**Validation of reflective measures.** Following Hair et al.'s (2020) guidelines, the measurement instruments used for Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions appear good, with outer loadings that are never below .60 (and in the vast majority of cases,  $>.70$ ). Both constructs always exhibit values of composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) greater than threshold levels of .70 and .50, respectively, across the different consumption contexts (see Table I in the Web Appendix).

**Validation of the formative measure of authenticity.** First, we conducted a redundancy analysis inspecting the correlation between the composite measure of Authenticity based on the six components and two highly correlated general measures of authenticity (reflective items). Results reveal that the six indicators exhibit a fair level of convergent validity. The correlation with the overall measure ranges from .65 to .77 across consumption contexts (see Table J in the Web Appendix) and

in the majority of cases is above the critical value of .70. Second, an analysis of the variance influence factors of the six indicators excludes collinearity issues in the estimation of the composite measure of Authenticity. Despite being fairly correlated (average interitem correlation = .45) due in part to study design choices, the greatest variance inflation factor across all contexts is 2.02, which is below the critical value of 3.0 (see Table K in the Web Appendix). Third, given that our composite includes more than four indicators, we can empirically test whether our data fit better with a formative versus reflective measurement model. A confirmatory tetrad analysis (Gudergan et al. 2008) reveals that five out of the nine nonvanishing tetrads in the full sample are different from zero. Across contexts, the same analysis reveals two nonzero nonvanishing tetrads for products and four for services, supporting the formative nature of our construct.

**Discriminant validity.** We ensure discriminant validity between our composite construct of authenticity and the reflective measures of attitude and behavioral intentions in two ways. First, according to the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, the square root of AVE values should be greater than the bivariate correlations for all of the constructs under investigation. In all cases (see Table L in the Web Appendix), each set of items loads more strongly with their correspondent construct than with any other construct in the model, suggesting that Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions measures are empirically distinct from those belonging to our composite measure of Authenticity and also distinct from one another. Note, however, that the traditional Fornell and Larcker criterion uses AVE as a baseline for comparison, and for formative constructs the AVE is not relevant. Therefore, we also apply the approach from Klein and Rai (2009), according to which discriminant validity for a formative construct is established when the average intraconstruct correlation (among the six component indicators for Authenticity in this case) is greater than the interconstruct correlations among its items and those of other constructs involved in the model. We find that the average intraconstruct correlation is greater than all interclass correlations across all contexts (differences range from .03 to .15; see Table M in the Web Appendix), thus ensuring the discriminant validity of the composite Authenticity construct.

### Structure of the Concept of Authenticity

The relationships between the component indicators and the composite Authenticity construct are represented by the outer weights estimated by the PLS consistent analysis (see Table 4, full sample). The outer weights are indicative of the relative role played by each of the six proposed indicators for the Authenticity composite construct. Examining the outer weights enables us to determine whether the full set of six indicators is appropriate when conceptualizing authenticity, as well as if and how an individual component's role might differ within and across contexts. What is clear from Table 4 is that all six, when present as they are in this case, can be considered valid indicators of the composite measure of Authenticity.

**Table 4.** Study 3: Outer Weights for Components of Authenticity (Full Sample).

	Outer Weights	Bias-Corrected Bootstrap CI	
		2.5%	97.5%
Accuracy → Authenticity	.217	.143	.291
Connectedness → Authenticity	.237	.163	.311
Integrity → Authenticity	.213	.142	.281
Legitimacy → Authenticity	.078	.019	.138
Originality → Authenticity	.248	.172	.323
Proficiency → Authenticity	.330	.249	.403

Notes: CI = confidence interval.

In most of the consumption contexts (see Table 5), one observes that Proficiency appears to be the most important component while Legitimacy is routinely the least important, and the other four typically fall somewhere in between. When outer weights are compared *within* each context for statistical differences (Streukens and Leroi-Werelds 2016), the six components seem to play a similar role in some contexts (e.g., utilitarian products, hedonic services) and a more dissimilar role in others (e.g., hedonic products). In certain cases, such as for low-coproduction services, components seem to inform the perceptions of authenticity in an idiosyncratic way (e.g., originality is more important than proficiency, accuracy, and legitimacy).

Comparing outer weights *across* contexts, certain components appear as more or less important to consumers' assessment of Authenticity, the specifics of which are worth examining more closely as they are highly informative and particularly relevant for practitioners. First, for products specifically, we find that Proficiency is more important to assessments of authenticity for hedonic than for utilitarian products ( $b = .489 > b = .217, p = .02$ ). It seems the skill and artisanship of the provider matter more when the primary benefit is affective or sensory pleasure. In addition, Legitimacy matters for utilitarian products but does not matter for hedonic products ( $b = .028, p = .65$ , factor loading  $< .5$ ). It appears that adhering to standards is unimportant when assessing authenticity unless the product is instrumental and intended to help reach a practical goal. It also appears that Integrity plays a more important role for durable than consumable products ( $b = .289 > b = .124, p = .11$ ). Although only directional, this result suggests the source's motives may matter more for authenticity assessments when a product is expected to have a longer life cycle.

Turning our attention to services, we find that Originality matters more when assessing the authenticity of low- (vs. high-) coproduction services ( $b = .411 > b = .116, p < .01$ ). It may be that when consumers contribute less in the cocreation of value, and thus perhaps fail to personalize the experience, the distinctiveness of the offering itself contributes more to authenticity assessments. Conversely, Legitimacy matters more when assessing the authenticity of high- (vs. low-) coproduction services

**Table 5.** Study 3: Outer Weights for Components of Authenticity.

Aggregated												
Authenticity	Nature of the Experience						Consumption Benefit					
	Products			Services		Hedonic			Utilitarian			
	b	p		b	p	b	p		b	p		
Accuracy	.247	.00	A	.165	.00	a	.279	.00	B	.187	.00	A
Connectedness	.219	.00		.232	.00	B	.129	.01	a	.244	.00	
Integrity	.196	.00		.237	.00	C	.177	.00	a	.275	.00	
Legitimacy	.085	.04	a	.077	.09	abc	.049	.31	ab	.114	.00	abc
Originality	.238	.00		.261	.00		.267	.00	a	.246	.00	B
Proficiency	.349	.00		.331	.00	A	.407*	.00	A	.261*	.00	C
Disaggregated												
Authenticity	Products						Services					
	Hedonic			Utilitarian		Hedonic			Utilitarian			
	b	p		b	p	b	p		b	p		
Accuracy	.291	.00	A	.247	.00		.220	.01		.129	.07	
Connectedness	.105	.15	b	.220	.00		.157	.04		.238	.00	
Integrity	.140	.00	b	.277	.00		.215	.00		.280	.00	A
Legitimacy	.028^	.65	ab	.139^	.01		.094	.19		.091	.13	ab
Originality	.239	.00	b	.252	.00		.289	.00		.233	.00	
Proficiency	.489**	.00	B	.217**	.01		.342	.00		.326	.00	B
Authenticity	Products						Services					
	Consumable			Durable		Low Coproduction			High Coproduction			
	b	p		b	p	b	p		b	p		
Accuracy	.245	.00		.257	.00		.097	.25	b	.201	.00	
Connectedness	.212	.00		.248	.00		.236	.01	C	.197	.00	
Integrity	.124	.06		.289	.00		.276	.00		.233	.00	
Legitimacy	.094	.12		.049	.37		-.033**	.63	abc	.178**	.00	
Originality	.268	.00		.205	.01		.411**	.00	B	.116**	.12	a
Proficiency	.392	.00		.268	.00		.271	.00	Ab	.385	.00	A

\* $p < .10$ .\*\* $p < .05$ .<sup>^</sup>Indicates that legitimacy matters for utilitarian but not hedonic products ( $b = .028$ ,  $p = .65$ , factor loading  $< .5$ ).Notes: Differences across contexts. Within contexts, components with a capital letter differ from components with the same letter that is lowercase at  $p < .01$ .

( $b = .178 > b = -.033$ ,  $p = .02$ ). Consumers more involved in cocreating value appear to care more about whether an offering adheres to specific standards. We consider the implications of these findings shortly. We should also mention that, at a general level, we find no clear evidence of heterogeneity based on gender or age.

The key takeaway here is these results support the intuition that authenticity should be conceptualized as a composite construct, and all indicators can matter, yet certain indicators matter more or less and sometimes not at all depending on the particular consumption context. Understanding the heterogeneity amongst the indicators forms one of the central managerial contributions of this research, a discernible set of prescriptions for marketers that we discuss in more detail subsequently.

### The Downstream Market Consequences of Authenticity

We next turn to the structural part of the model, the relationships involving Authenticity and the other constructs. Recall that the framework in Figure 2 includes the extent to which Authenticity predicts Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions. Table 6 includes the path coefficients associated with the total effect of Authenticity on Behavioral Intentions. This is further decomposed into the direct effect and the indirect effect mediated by Attitudes, presented separately for the different contexts of interest.

Across products and services, and hedonic and utilitarian offerings, Authenticity exhibits a similar, sizable association with Behavioral Intentions (squared coefficients range from

**Table 6.** Study 3: Path Coefficients.

	<b>Aggregated</b>							
	<b>Products</b>		<b>Services</b>		<b>Hedonic</b>		<b>Utilitarian</b>	
	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>
Authenticity → Behavioral Intentions (Total effect)	.626	.00	.666	.00	.584	.00	.680	.00
Authenticity → Behavioral Intentions (Direct effect)	.442	.00	.381	.00	.334	.00	.534	.00
Authenticity → Attitudes → Behavioral Intentions (Indirect effect)	.184	.00	.285	.00	.250	.00	.146	.00
	<b>Disaggregated</b>							
	<b>Products</b>				<b>Services</b>			
	<b>Hedonic</b>		<b>Utilitarian</b>		<b>Hedonic</b>		<b>Utilitarian</b>	
	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>
Authenticity → Behavioral Intentions (Total effect)	.606	.00	.616	.00	.567	.02	.740	.00
Authenticity → Behavioral Intentions (Direct effect)	.407	.00	.479	.00	.237	.00	.537	.00
Authenticity → Attitudes → Behavioral Intentions (Indirect effect)	.199	.00	.137	.01	.330	.00	.202	.00
	<b>Products</b>				<b>Services</b>			
	<b>Consumable</b>		<b>Durable</b>		<b>Low Coproduction</b>		<b>High Coproduction</b>	
	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>
Authenticity → Behavioral Intentions (Total effect)	.644	.00	.584	.00	.724	.00	.599	.00
Authenticity → Behavioral Intentions (Direct effect)	.436	.00	.384	.00	.410	.00	.333	.00
Authenticity → Attitudes → Behavioral Intentions (Indirect effect)	.207	.00	.200	.00	.314	.00	.266	.00

39% to 52%). This implies that when evaluating a consumption experience, there is a positive association between the assessment of authenticity and a consumer's inclination to search for further information, purchase the offering, and spread positive information via word of mouth. Simply put, the composite measure of Authenticity with the six indicators we identify appears to be a predictor of consumers' Behavioral Intentions across various types of consumption experiences. The disaggregated results in Table 6 show that the association of Authenticity with Behavioral Intentions is stronger for utilitarian (vs. hedonic) services ( $b = .537 > b = .237, p = .02$ ) and is stronger for high- (vs. low-) coproduction services ( $b = .724 > b = .599, p = .04$ ). The implication is that authenticity matters more to consumers when the consumption goal for a service is instrumental and goal-oriented and when customers are more hands-off in terms of cocreating the service experience. However, some care should be taken when interpreting the latter

result as it is not supported by full compositional invariance (Henseler, Hubona, and Ray 2016).

Focusing on the indirect effect, we observe that Attitudes only partially mediates the effect of Authenticity on Behavioral Intentions. This result further supports the notion that authenticity is conceptually and empirically distinct from attitudes. Indeed, attitudes, as learned predispositions (Fishbein 1967) typically vary along an evaluative continuum from strongly positive to strongly negative, while authenticity as we define it is neither inherently positive nor negative. Consider, for example, that different individuals may like or dislike highly authentic Thai food (as accurately reflecting how it is made in Thailand). Given the objectives of Study 3, we constructed descriptions of experiences expecting greater authenticity to contribute to more positive attitudes. While we suspect that naive theory would predict that consumers typically prefer the authentic to the inauthentic (e.g., brands accurately reflecting



manufacturers, original as opposed to derivative works of art), this need not be the case (e.g., covers of songs that exceed the original in popularity).

The results also suggest that authenticity can affect behavioral intentions through routes other than those associated with positive attitudes. This raises the specter of other reasons Authenticity and Behavioral Intentions might be linked, such as purely economic interests (e.g., as an investment), or a purely emotional response (e.g., nostalgia). Practically speaking, these results imply consumers can be inclined to buy products and services deemed authentic even if they do not especially “like” them, which underscores the importance of considering authenticity as a semi-autonomous driver of consumer decision making.

## Implications for Theory

What does it mean for a consumption experience to be “authentic”? The answer depends on how one conceptualizes authenticity. The marketing literature provides no straightforward answer, as it is replete with varying definitions of what it means to be authentic. Researchers seem to have little trouble generating new definitions related to authenticity. However, until now there has been no attempt to evaluate, deconstruct, or synthesize what is commonly known about what makes consumption authentic. In this research, we engage in a systematic and comprehensive concept reconstruction effort, in which we identify the component indicators that define authenticity as it applies to consumption, reconcile them with the existing literature, and provide the first detailed investigation into the higher-order conceptual structure (i.e., the relationship between authenticity as a construct and its components), setting this work apart from previous research. To illustrate how this work can extend current knowledge, consider Morhart et al. (2015), who developed and validated scales measuring consumers’ perceived brand authenticity along four distinct dimensions. In doing so, they provide initial evidence that these four dimensions do not align into a higher-order reflective construct. Our findings may help explain their results; it may be that their four brand authenticity dimensions are composite indicators as well.

A distinguishing feature of this work is that we take a multimethod approach, utilizing qualitative methods to derive authenticity’s composite set of indicators *and* quantitative methods to empirically investigate how these indicators contribute to authenticity judgments across different consumption contexts. In addition, the reconciliation with existing literature and evidence of heterogeneity help make sense of the disparate ways in which authenticity has been defined in the extant literature. Note that the heterogeneity detected across contexts is consistent with a “family resemblance” concept structure, according to which a concept (authenticity, in this case) may be qualified by different subsets of its dimensions across different contexts, and not always by all of them in the same way (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2016). Again, this is consistent with authenticity being a dimension

word, with its meaning remaining uncertain until one knows which of its dimensions are being discussed (Dutton 2003). This type of reconceptualization might prove useful to improving the understanding of other marketing constructs that may be conceptually ambiguous.

Conceptualizing authenticity as we have done has important implications for researchers interested in studying the concept in a consumption context. In addition to providing a fuller understanding of what it means for a consumption experience to be authentic, our work helps delineate aspects of an offering that might be manipulated with the intention of changing perceptions of authenticity. Past work in marketing has manipulated certain qualities of an offering presumed to impact perceptions of authenticity (e.g., whether a product is from a company’s original manufacturing location; Newman and Dhar 2014). We suspect being associated with the original manufacturing location reflects a history of consistency, which, in our broad conceptualization, is associated with the component of integrity. In this vein, this research offers guidance on how researchers might systematically identify other specific qualities of an offering that impact assessments of authenticity (e.g., features related to the source’s proficiency). For example, one might predict that consumers will consider food cooked by a more recognized chef as more authentic because that chef is perceived as more proficient. Manipulating cues related to these six components could shed further light on how exactly to measure the components we identify and would provide further insight into how marketers can effectively influence consumers’ assessments of authenticity.

Given the evidence of heterogeneity we observe among the various components, it would be interesting to examine the relationship between the various components more thoroughly. Consider proficiency, the component that seems to matter most, and legitimacy, the component that seems to matter least. It would seem that skillfulness and artisanship are appreciated without necessarily needing to adhere to tradition (Beverland 2005), keep to specific genres (Delmestri, Montanari, and Usai 2005), or fit neatly within a category (Carroll and Wheaton 2009; Newman 2019). Thinking about how different components relate reinforces the need to reconsider the meaning of concepts periodically and highlights the benefit of concept reconstruction. From our reading of the authenticity literature, historically, far less attention has been paid to qualities of the source (e.g., proficiency, accuracy, integrity) than to qualities of the output (originality, legitimacy). Our holistic conceptualization takes both into account as well as a sense of connectedness between the consumer and the source.

The six components we identify also reveal underlying tensions with respect to how authenticity is appraised (e.g., legitimacy means conforming to standards, whereas originality means standing out). Recall, for example, that legitimacy matters more for high-coproduction services while, conversely, originality matters more for low-coproduction services. It would seem that consumers who are highly involved hedge the risk of reducing authenticity with their participation and idiosyncrasies by weighting the service’s adherence to

standards (legitimacy) more heavily. Conversely, when consumers are less involved, they put greater weight on the firm's ability to make its offering distinct (originality) when assessing authenticity. This example reveals how much context matters when considering a concept such as authenticity.

This research also contributes to our understanding of authenticity's broader role in consumer decision making. Unlike any prior research of which we are aware, we show how authenticity is connected to consumers' behavioral intentions both directly and indirectly through attitudes. We do so while ensuring discriminant validity between authenticity, attitudes, and behavioral intentions. Thus, this research enhances our understanding of the role of authenticity in consumer decision making and offers a more complete picture of the importance of authenticity to the field.

## Insights for Practitioners

For practitioners, this work provides valuable insights to marketing managers aiming to enhance the authenticity of their offerings, something that should be of concern to all managers in an environment in which being seen as authentic is increasingly considered table stakes. First, we identify a comprehensive set of judgments consumers make when assessing the authenticity of a consumption experience. Knowing that judgments of accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency are key components when assessing authenticity, managers can more efficiently and effectively deduce actionable strategies in terms of positioning. How consumers themselves express these judgments is evident in the verbiage in Tables F and H in the Web Appendix. Managers may also identify where there are shortfalls in their offerings on these fronts. In addition, they now also have an initial roadmap with respect to which judgments are more or less important in line with certain characteristics of their offerings. For example, companies selling hedonic products should see relatively large returns, perception-wise, from emphasizing proficiency. The mattress company Tuft & Needle (what is more hedonic than sleep?) leverages on this by making it very clear on its website that it believes in "quality craftsmanship without the gimmicks" ([www.tuftandneedle.com/about/story](http://www.tuftandneedle.com/about/story)). Knowing the six components enables managers to assess how competitors currently signal authenticity and presents alternative routes to signal the authenticity of their own offerings.

Another example of how managers might leverage the findings presented here includes using them to better understand the role of the consumption context. Consider how originality is more important for low-coproduction services, whereas legitimacy is only important for high-coproduction services. If we consider the services utilized in our studies for illustration, it is important for movies and sporting events to be distinctive (original) to be deemed authentic, while banking and health services should ensure that they are seen as adhering to recognized standards (legitimate). With respect to movies, consider previous research showing that film sequels are more successful if named (e.g., *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*)

than if they are numbered (e.g., *Spider-Man 2*) precisely because they are perceived as more dissimilar from their predecessor (Sood and Drèze 2006). The success of emphasizing originality for services such as movies is consistent with our findings, as is the fact Bank of America (2021, p. 5) makes it abundantly clear that it maintains a culture committed to ethical behavior and "complying with applicable laws, rules, regulations and policies." Although we do not have direct evidence of the efficacy of these actions in terms of advancing perceptions of authenticity per se, the real-world examples presented here are intended to show how managers can emphasize and act on different components of authenticity. Managers may want to remember the apocryphal yet prescient words of Coco Chanel, who is quoted as saying, "Hard times arouse an instinctive desire for authenticity."

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