

"You should be sorry": The Consequences of Being 'Too Real' or Living Like a Fraud

Abstract

"Je pense, donc je suis" ("I think, therefore I am") — René Descartes, Discourse on the Method

The first seed of existential thought was planted in the 17th century by René Descartes, who argued that the very act of doubting constitutes a thought, and thereby of existence itself¹. Later philosophers expanded our understanding of authenticity. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Friedrich Nietzsche conceptualises the Übermensch as a figure of overcoming and self-transformation³. The self is a dynamic entity, always in motion, calling us to transform beyond ourselves. Jacques Derrida interrogates the notion of a singular, static self in *Of Grammatology*⁴. Rather, he suggests that our sense of meaning and place in this world is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Michel Foucault's nearly completed *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality* demonstrated how authentic self-expression emerge within networks of social discipline⁵ beyond individual agency. These processes of subjectification transmute throughout one's lifetime.

This paper dissects authenticity spanning across multiple experimental domains. Through dialectical analyses of case studies ranging from biometric authentication to pharmaceutical counterfeiting to cultural appropriation, this investigation explores how we can be authentically present without becoming overbearing, exploitative, or dangerous.

¹ Descartes, René. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Ian Maclean. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1637], 17-32

² CosmicSkeptic. 2022. "Descartes' Most Famous Idea | Explained." *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INdrQ2wf6xs>.

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1966 [1883-1885], 124-139

⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976 [1967], 6-26.

⁵ Foucault, Michel. *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1988 [1984], 37-68.

Hypothesis

The central hypothesis that serves as a binding force across these different domains: contemporary authenticity, as both a tool that both liberates and performs, depending on context, warrants a critical evaluation of when being "real" serves as a genuine flourishing of the self, versus when it masks harm.

Methodology

This paper employs a quasi-experimental approach to understanding modern authenticity. Human activity serves as a testing ground for authenticity's functions and failures. Theoretical frameworks like Derridean deconstruction, Foucauldian power analyses and Nietzschean self-creation will be employed within each sphere.

Each pseudo-experiment considers variables such as technology, regulation, and social context, with outcomes measured in trust, safety, and power, and controls drawn from history and cross-cultural comparison.

This study introduces a new index framework known as a 'Authenticity Threshold' to assist our understanding by visualising it in tangible terms⁶. While absolute (in)authenticity does not exist, we can approximate authenticity to a spectrum. Scores range from 0 (absolute inauthenticity) to 100 (absolute authenticity), with higher numbers signalling a need for greater urgency.

Authentic Performance: A tightrope between Cultural Authentication and Professional Fraud

The authentication of identity operates across multiple registers: cultural, professional, and personal. Each domain reveals different mechanisms by which society polices the boundaries between authentic and performative selfhood.

Case Study: Cultural Appropriation vs. Cultural Evolution

From Ariana Grande's "七輪" (shichirin) tattoo (intended to say "七つの指輪" (seven rings), but actually meaning "small barbecue grill")⁷, to Dolce and

⁶ Kumar Chaudhary, Anil, and Glenn D. Israel. 2016. "Savvy Survey #6d: Constructing Indices for a Questionnaire." *EDIS* 2016 (1): 6. <https://doi.org/10.32473/edis-pd069-2015>.

⁷ Twersky, Carolyn. 2019. "11 Celebrities Who Have Been Accused of Cultural Appropriation." *Seventeen*. *Seventeen*. February 4, 2019. <https://www.seventeen.com/celebrity/g22363821/cultural-appropriation-examples-celebrities/>.

Gabbana's racist marketing campaign that led to the cancellation of their 2018 Shanghai fashion show⁸. Repeatedly, the media illuminates how cultural authenticity becomes commodified and policed. Grande's mistake, critics argued, reflected cultural appropriation, a superficial adoption of Japanese aesthetics without understanding. Similarly, D&G's advertising campaign, which features a Chinese model eating pasta and pizza with chopsticks showed a poor, if not blatant disrespect towards the Chinese diaspora, implying that Chinese people are culturally ignorant.

However, we must also acknowledge that the demand for cultural authenticity creates impossible standards that often puts people in a lose-lose situation, especially for high-profile celebrities like Grande. Had she learned Japanese fluently, critics might say she was performing Asian identity. If she avoided Japanese cultural references entirely, she could be accused of cultural segregation.

Authenticity Threshold: Although it has stepped on many toes and caused a sensation, their cultural faux passes have mostly been forgotten as fast as they came. If anything, it has brought about productive discussions regarding race and culture. Hence, it is awarded a score of 28 (low)

When Machines Determine Human Authenticity

Socio-cultural Definitions of Technological Authenticity

Technological authentication varies dramatically across linguistic and cultural contexts. For instance, the Mandarin term "真实性" (zhēnshí xìng) prioritises truthfulness (真) and reality (实), while "正宗" (zhèngzōng) connotes orthodox legitimacy relating to the originator.

This distinction is crucial for understanding how Chinese consumers, the largest global consumer base⁹, utilise technology scanners and digital verification systems. In a world of increasing technological sophistication comes increasingly elaborate scams, where 'superfakes' like Birkin imitations purportedly made in the same factory as the real one are increasingly hard to

⁸ News, BBC. 2018. "Dolce and Gabbana Cancels Shanghai Fashion Show amid Racism Accusations." Bbc.com. BBC News. November 21, 2018. <http://bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-46288884>.

⁹ Tang, Frank. 2020. "China to Pass US, Become World's Top Consumer Goods Market 'Very Soon.'" South China Morning Post. November 30, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3111954/china-overtake-us-become-worlds-top-consumer-goods-market>.

spot¹⁰. Interestingly, it seems that the rising generation of consumers from the Gen Z cohort are not too concerned about the authenticity of such counterfeits¹¹, as genuine products feel increasingly out of touch with their values¹² and their purchasing power¹³.

Consider also the socio-cultural implications when biometric systems, designed around Eurocentric physical features, are deployed globally. In the US, facial recognition technology trained heavily with white faces has been found to discriminate disproportionately against Black men, leading to false arrests¹⁴. This represents what Foucault would recognize as biopower¹⁵; the management of bodies and populations through technological systems that claim objectivity while embedding cultural assumptions¹⁶. The world is increasingly reliant on technology. Hence, any mishaps due to the use of technology, including authentication technology, can have reverberating repercussions ranging from inconveniences to life-altering implications.

Authenticity Threshold: 40 (medium)

Case Study: Diamond Authentication Technology

Diamond testing machines illuminate the paradox of technological authenticity. These devices use thermal conductivity tests to distinguish "real" diamonds from simulants like cubic zirconia. However, a diamond stimulant moissanite conducts heat better than authentic diamonds, causing some testing machines to

¹⁰ Kim, Deborah, Doc Louallen, Caroline Pahl, Lizann Robinson, Tara Guaimano, and Karen Ye. 2024. "Superfakes: Copycat Manufacturers Are Becoming Increasingly Skilled at Producing Knock-off Designer Handbags." ABC News. April 29, 2024. <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/superfakes-copycat-manufacturers-becoming-increasingly-skilled-producing-knock/story?id=109344382>.

¹¹ Dawkins, Jennifer Ortakales. 2023. "The Rise of 'Superfakes': How High-Quality Designer Knockoffs Became Indistinguishable from the Real Thing." Business Insider. August 24, 2023. <https://www.businessinsider.com/superfake-handbags-clothing-almost-real-knockoffs-2023-7>.

¹² Walfisz, Jonathan. 2019. "'We Need to Drive Home the Message' – INTA Study Reveals Generation Z's Attitude to Counterfeits." Worldtrademarkreview.com. 2019. https://www.worldtrademarkreview.com/article/we-need-drive-home-the-message-inta-study-reveals-generation-zs-attitude-counterfeits?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹³ Pullmann, Erin. 2024. "Today's News Roundup—July 10, 2024." International Trademark Association. July 10, 2024. https://www.inta.org/wp-content/uploads/public-files/perspectives/industry-research/INTA-Gen-Z-Insights_Global.

¹⁴ Kayyali, Dia. 2025. "The High Stakes of Biometric Surveillance." Tech Policy Press. June 23, 2025. <https://www.techpolicy.press/the-high-stakes-of-biometric-surveillance/>.

¹⁵ Adams, Rachel. 2017. "Michel Foucault: Biopolitics and Biopower." Critical Legal Thinking. May 10, 2017. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2017/05/10/michel-foucault-biopolitics-biopower/>.

¹⁶ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1975], 170-194

register it as "more authentic" than the genuine article¹⁷. Ironically, the 'fake' stone outperforms the 'real'.

Surprisingly, lab-grown diamonds, molecularly identical to mined diamonds, register as authentic on all technological tests. Yet, they are classified as "synthetic" by gemmological institutes.

Authenticity Threshold: Technology shows authenticity depends less on nature than on human categories of value. 26 (low)

Life-Or-Death In the Name of (In)authenticity

Case Study: Environmental Authenticity in Fashion

The environmental impact of authentic versus counterfeit luxury goods reveals unexpected inversions of authenticity. Built on a capitalist, seasonal consumerist model, fast fashion has long contributed to environmental degradation¹⁸, accounting for a tenth of global pollution¹⁹. However, high fashion houses are not innocent either²⁰. With little transparency in their supply chain, pervasive exploitation of resources and marginalised communities, luxury fashion, especially leather reliant on cattle, also drives environmental harm. Both fast fashion and high fashion are main culprits of environmental degradation.

Authenticity Threshold: 58 (medium), projected to grow to 70 in future due to sustainability issues

Case Study: Pharmaceutical Authenticity and Global Health

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how pharmaceutical authenticity operates differently across global contexts. In wealthy countries, "authentic" vaccines required extensive regulatory approval and controlled distribution. In countries

¹⁷ Singh, Anupama. 2023. "What Is a Diamond Tester and Can It Be Wrong | Fabulously." Fabulously. November 29, 2023. <https://www.fabulously.in/blog/diamond-tester>.

¹⁸ Maiti, Rashmila. 2025. "The Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion, Explained." Earth.org. January 20, 2025. <https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/>.

¹⁹ Clarke, Rebekah. 2021. "Fast Fashion's Carbon Footprint." The Carbon Literacy Project. The Carbon Literacy Trust. August 2021. <https://carbonliteracy.com/fast-fashions-carbon-footprint/>.

²⁰ Stand.earth. 2023. "Quiet (but Polluting) Luxury – Luxury Fashion Brands Are out Here Costing Us the Earth." Stand.earth. May 8, 2023. <https://stand.earth/insights/quiet-but-polluting-luxury-luxury-brands-are-costing-us-the-planet/>.

lacking vaccine access, "inauthentic" locally produced vaccines using established technology represented more authentic public health responses²¹²².

Surprisingly, some WHO-unapproved vaccines demonstrated better efficacy rates than approved alternatives, raising questions about whether regulatory authenticity serves public health or pharmaceutical industry interests.

Authenticity threshold: 85 (high)

Limitations of the study

While this study best attempts to provide breadth and depth in the analysis of applied authenticity, we are constrained by our personal knowledge and availability of resources, which prohibits our full conceptual understanding of authenticity. Moreover, it is difficult to concretise a concept so vague and subjective as authenticity itself, especially since authenticity cannot be formally defined. One's personal definition and threshold for authenticity. This study aggregates applied knowledge rather than prescribing how to live authentically

Conclusion

The experimental evidence suggests we should be sorry (i.e. deeply concerned) when authenticity becomes an exploitative performance to manipulate others in any way, a form of algorithmic control to determine human value and identity, environmental destruction or safety compromise.

We should not be sorry for:

- Questioning institutional definitions of authenticity
- Choosing environmental authenticity over brand authenticity
- Recognizing authenticity's performative dimensions
- Adapting cultural practices across boundaries when done respectfully
- Prioritizing authentic outcomes over authentic credentials

²¹ Saeed, Gul, and Jillian Clare Kohler. 2025. "Corruption Risks in COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment: Lessons Learned for Future Pandemic Preparedness." *Globalization and Health* 21 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-025-01096-6>.

²² Baldwin, Steven T. 2022. "Commentary on 'Rethinking the International Response System to Global Health Threats: Strengthening International Collaboration to Ensure Vaccine Equity and Combat Vaccination Hesitancy.'" *Southern Medical Journal* 115 (3): 168–74. <https://doi.org/10.14423/smj.0000000000001366>.

The goal is not perfect authenticity but rather taking authentic responsibility: being genuine about our motivations while considering the broader consequences of our authentic self-expression.

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This essay makes use of prompt technology for the following purposes:

- Bibliographic citation and sources to look out for, what works I can refer to, whether I referenced the correct portion (with my own checks for source accuracy)
- Feedback on writing. Integrity and grammar checks, as well as sentence tightening and structural flow to make my arguments clearer and content more succinct

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