

Cultures of Authenticity

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Cultures of Authenticity

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Cultures of Authenticity

Thomas Thurnell-Read, Michael Skey and Marie Heřmanová

Authenticity seems everywhere and nowhere at once. It is a widely used term in academia, popular culture and in everyday conversation. You might find it difficult to walk through a supermarket or department store without encountering products proudly claiming their authenticity. Turning on a television, flipping through a magazine or scrolling social media invariably turns up textual and visual content intentionally designed to convince you that a particular person, place or experience is authentic, and therefore worthy of your respect, your trust, your money or your vote. Authenticity is debated in relation to media production, to online communication, to artistic production and experiences, sought after in consumption culture and consequently in branding and marketing (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In a world defined by the consumption of mass-produced goods and increasingly digitally mediated communication, the notion of authenticity clearly resonates with the aspirations and anxieties of many individuals.

Authenticity is valued, often obsessively so. For artists, musicians and other creative souls, authenticity, or the lack of it, might be the difference between critical acclaim and obscurity. Music fans might suddenly discard a previously venerated singer, band or genre because their music or their actions reveal them to be inauthentic, at least as they are presented through their creative persona. Authenticity is gold dust for politicians, celebrities and other public figures; those who are perceived as possessing it, by chance or by design, bask in the rosy glow of public approval and admiration. Authenticity is felt to be so desired by consumers and by tourists that the retail and travel industries employ vast armies of staff whose main purpose is to propagate confidence in the authenticity of a particular brand or destination, and to repel any attempts to undermine such claims on which much of their commercial value rests.

It is unsurprising, then, that authenticity has and continues to be of interest across a diverse range of academic fields. Authenticity has long been a prominent topic in tourism studies (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999) and has been a recurring theme in work on folklore traditions (Bendix, 2009) and heritage (Jokilehto, 2006). In the sprawling discipline of communication, media and cultural studies, authenticity has featured in work on youth subcultures (Williams,

2006), participants and fans of both mainstream (Davis, 2015) and alternative sports (Wheaton & Beal, 2003), and in analyses of reality television and celebrities (Allen & Mendick, 2013; Meyers, 2009). The growing popularity of the type of personal branding and commodification of identities that digital communication platforms allow for has caused an increased interest in what being authentic online means and, further still, raises questions about the authenticity of our digitally mediated experiences and personas. Recent scholarship on authenticity on social media (Duffy, 2016; Reade, 2021) explores the notion of authenticity as part of the performative ecologies of the platforms (Abidin, 2018). Perhaps surprisingly, given these disciplines interest in promotion and influence, authenticity has arrived relatively recently in business studies and marketing yet has, following the influential intervention by Gilmore and Pine (2007), rapidly gained traction (e.g. Becker, Wiegand, & Reinartz, 2019; Gundlach & Neville, 2012). Finally the fields of politics and, in particular, political communication have also seen a recent rise in studies of the topic, notably in relation to the prominence of populist leaders and parties, who often look to distinguish themselves from more established rivals with reference to their authentic policies and personalities (Luebke, 2021; Theye & Melling, 2018).

Rarely, however, are these disciplines in conversation with each other. Across these diverse fields, many come to the concept as a means to dissect tensions and contradictions they have found in an already established programme of substantive research. Far fewer set out with authenticity as their initial and sole consideration. The task of understanding authenticity is necessarily an interdisciplinary endeavour, as is this volume.

The Paradox of Authenticity

While authenticity is commonly understood intuitively, and many feel confident that they know what it is when they see it, it is frustratingly resistant to being pinned down by any exact definition. This is the first of many peculiar yet fascinating things about authenticity, its ubiquity has generated more, rather than less, uncertainty about its nature, purpose and value. Even amongst those who have devoted considerable time and energy to analysing authenticity there is a feeling that the term is an elusive ‘moving target’ (Boyle, 2003, p. 39), frequently cloaked in ambiguity and contradiction. Thus, in one of her important contributions to understandings of the concept, Sharon Zukin (2010, p. xii) describes authenticity as having something of a ‘schizoid quality’ (Zukin, 2010, p. xii), while for Gunn Enli (2015) authenticity is a ‘paradox’. In trying to pin down the concept of authenticity, there are a number of recurring features which are useful to consider at the outset.

Authenticity should not be viewed as a *thing* that can be possessed or held with any degree of certainty. Rather, it is dynamic, and changes relative to the conditions under which it is sought, created and recognised. It is in the processes by which authenticity is acknowledged, attributed and contested that the clearest insights emerge, along with many of the most vexing, yet intellectually intriguing, issues. As Vannini and Williams (2009, p. 3) suggest:

Authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar.

Thus, the processes by which something is affirmed as being authentic or possessing authentic qualities reveal the subjective and unequal nature of authority and authentication. The ability to bestow and accrue authenticity rests in the disparities of an unequal culture and society. Put simply, some people, groups or organisations have greater power to confer and benefit from authenticity than others, their authenticity claims being more easily accepted or less readily and willingly challenged.

Authenticity is often discussed in relation to concepts that it is either associated or contrasted with. A concern with authenticity, then, often manifests in conversations about reality, originality, truthfulness and sincerity. So too does it appear in anxieties relating to artifice, imitation, forgery and falsehood. In many fields, conversation invariably drifts to what is *inauthentic*, so that the question of what counts as authentic remains answered. This kind of ‘oppositional authenticity’ (Thurnell-Read, 2019) relies on the identification and, very often, denigration of the inauthentic as a means of maintaining a claim that something, someone or somewhere is, in contrast, authentic. The performative and processual nature of authenticity is revealed most lucidly when claims to authenticity are revealed as false. Considering the centrality of authenticity to much media representation, Enli (2015) examines such moments, where the collusion between the media and its audiences breaks down. This is when, what she terms, the ‘authenticity contract’ is broken and the role of mediation in the construction of perceptions of truth and reality are laid bare. On these occasions, we see the emergence of what Corciolani (2014) refers to as ‘authenticity dramas’, where a sudden rupturing of claims to authenticity mean an often fragile consensus is undermined, or broken altogether. These attempts to recover or reinstate authenticity reveal its constructed, highly contingent, nature.

Authenticity is highly valued. Gilmore and Pine (2007, p. 5) argue that the desire for authenticity is becoming the defining consumer sensibility, and go as far as suggesting that ‘the vitality of advanced economies will flow directly from the individual and collective ability of businesses to master the discipline of authenticity’. However, processes which are seen as extracting this value can often threaten to denude it of the very authenticity that made it desirable in the first place. Commercial strategies and branding initiatives feel antithetical to a notion of authenticity that supposes something cannot be popular, at least in the commercial sense, and remain authentic. As mainstream popularity and commercial success increase, claims to authenticity may become harder to sustain. As a result, both the authentic thing itself and the commercial activities drawing value from it become subject to cynicism and critique. This dynamic drives a well-established cycle. First authenticity is established in a given field or in relation to a particular thing, and in the process made desirable and commercially lucrative. It then becomes exploitable as a resource by varied actors, many of whom won’t have a

sincere interest in the thing itself. Finally a reversal occurs where inauthenticity is foregrounded and replacements are sought. Again, this renders authenticity a moving, changeable and at times frustratingly elusive subject.

Seeking Authenticity in Times of Uncertainty

Authenticity has a long history and concern about authenticity, both in intellectual debates and in wider culture, tends to run in cycles, with both new fascinations emerging and old tensions resurfacing in each new cycle. We see this in the early focus on authenticity in fine art being followed by a shift to popular culture and in relation to the transformations that have been wrought by digital technologies, notably social media. In particular, it is at times of rapid social, cultural and technological change that authenticity appears to become most coveted and debates about its nature are at their most urgent. This is a central analytical strand in many of the key works conceptualising authenticity. Thus, for [Taylor \(1991\)](#), it is the full or partial collapse of previously taken for granted hierarchies and categories, characteristic of processes of modernisation, that gives rise to a search for authenticity both directed within, to the inner self, and outwards, to the society of others. Similarly, [Lindholm \(2008, p. 5\)](#) suggests that the upheavals of the modern era propagated an ‘anxiety about the stability of the taken-for-granted’ which in turn led to the ‘intensified efforts to ratify the Western experience as somehow absolute and true’, with the outcome of this anxiety bring ‘a heightened concern with cultural and personal authenticity’.

Authenticity is a matter for modern life then and it infuses and influences decisions about how one navigates a world defined by mass societies and industrial production and suffused with representation, imitation and artifice. Past treatments of authenticity by literary critic Lionel Trilling (1972), philosopher Charles [Taylor \(1991\)](#) and anthropologist Charles [Lindholm \(2008\)](#) have conceptualised authenticity and sought to explain its relevance not just to contemporary culture and but to personal life and the most intimate understandings of the self. For [Trilling \(1972, p. 93\)](#), who draws an analytical thread back to Jean Jacques Rousseau, authenticity is ‘a word of ominous import’ indicative of ‘our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences’. He goes on to argue that this is why the modern era saw the rise of a notion of personal authenticity as an aesthetic and moral quality of being true to oneself and one’s original being. These concerns about authenticity emerged around the end of the eighteenth century and drew from both earlier and emergent concerns with individualism, self-determination and the inner moral self. For [Taylor \(1991, p. 29\)](#), what was culturally novel about notions of authenticity emerging from this time onwards was ‘the powerful moral ideal that has come down to us’ whereby the model by which one must lead their life is found within an inner nature, unique to the individual yet ‘in danger of being lost’. A modern concern with the ethics of authenticity, then, brings with it a fixation with self-fulfilment and self-realisation and a discontent with the external threats to the quest for these.

The desire for authenticity is driven by dissatisfactions with modernity and the forms of social life and standardised experiences it offers ([Boyle, 2003](#)).

An early precursor to this enduring theme is Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Here the German philosopher famously argued that the advent of innovative reproductive technologies such as photography meant copies of original art works could be accessed by the masses. This process, he argued, stripped original works of their uniqueness, the 'aura' from which they drew much of its distinctive beauty. A legacy of this period is the belief that machines and machine like things that function according to mundane repetition and regularity are 'felt to be inimical to the authenticity of experience and being' (Trilling, 1972, p. 128). As the century wore on, the means of reproduction and representation proliferated, eventually coalescing into what we now call the mass media. However the flashy accessibility of mass culture and the potency of reproductive processes were seen to be inherently destructive of originality, uniqueness and truth, which became central to many critiques of contemporary society. The American historian Daniel Boorstin (1962), for example, denounced the proliferation of so called 'pseudo-events' in American life, spectacular imitations all too easily mistaken for and accepted as authentic yet deplorable in their contrived superficiality.

The desire for authenticity is also heightened, manipulated even, by the proliferation of means of producing and communicating claims to authenticity (Orvell, 1989). With the emergence of mass media, and the more recent rise of digital media in particular, the sheer amount of mass-produced 'content' generates new concerns about the authenticity of information and of communication practices in general. Across these debates it becomes clear that authenticity has always been intrinsically bound up with the means by which it is presented, communicated and witnessed. Furthermore, this points towards a further contradiction. The social and cultural upheavals that promulgate a desire for authenticity also, ironically enough, gave rise to the latest communication technologies which facilitated new debates around, and anxieties about, the concept.

The Digital Age of In/Authenticity

More recent concerns about authenticity have been presented in both public and academic discussions about digitally mediated interactions, notably the debate about the relation of our online and offline lived realities. As Horst and Miller (2012) note, the rise of the digital brought with it a sense that our interactions mediated by the Internet, are somehow less real, less human, less authentic than what occurs offline. This premise has fuelled a large part of the recent resurgence of interest in the topic. The permeation of the internet and social media into all corners of society and, importantly, into every facet of personal life takes these long running concerns and invests them with a new sense of significance. The advent and meteoric rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok has led to a growing interest in debates around authenticity. Here, scholars have tried to explain the appeal of internet celebrities, their followers and the wider pressure to self-present an 'authentic' version of the self in digital spaces. Social media influencers often build their fame, economic success and cultural capital on the fact that they present themselves, unlike traditional

celebrities, as ‘common people’. For many, their appeal lies in their apparent ordinariness and in order to maintain a relationship with their followers to being seen as authentic is key.

As Crystal Abidin (2018) points out, authenticity is now part of ‘performative ecology’ of social media and social media influencers employ different strategies to build and enhance their authentic personas online (Audrezet et al., 2020). In the world of digital communication platforms, authenticity is often defined as opposed to what vernacular internet language denotes as ‘fake’, yet both fake-ness and authenticity are also strategic choices and carefully constructed personal brands. Pooley (2021) observes that ‘the result is a mutual awareness of calculation, a presumption that the seemingly authentic is instead an artefact of strategy. This leaves everyone, from the casual user to the self-employed influencer, caught in a bind (see also Enli, 2015). The search for authenticity thus generates a new tension and whole variety of new meanings, as one section of this book explores. On social media, the desire to be seen as authentic becomes a continuous, creative and dynamic process of production, surveillance, assessment and then negotiation. Moreover, many of the same issues and uncertainties felt in the past eras are being intensified by the pace which these new modes of communication and self-presentation allow or, indeed, demand.

Keeping it Real?: Authentic Things, Places and People

The anthropologist Charles Lindholm (2008, p. 1) opens his treatment of the term by observing that ‘the quest for authenticity touches and transforms a vast range of human experiences today – we speak of authentic art, authentic music, authentic food, authentic dance, authentic people, authentic roots, authentic meanings, authentic nations, authentic products’. The sentiment that authenticity is desirable but is found elsewhere – in the foreign cultures of people living closer to traditional ways of life (MacCannell, 1973), residing in folk lore traditions surviving the invasions of modernity (Bendix, 2009) or in nature and the spaces we convince ourselves to be ‘untouched by man’ (Dudley, 2012) – casts the search for authenticity as an urgent quest. Yet, at least some of the intellectual interest in authenticity as a topic of research is the cleavage between seeing authenticity as being something profound and essential that resides in a rare number of things, places and people, and the realism that claims authenticity is unavoidably rooted in a society that is unequal, cynical and competitive. From this contradiction emerge many of the tensions that fascinate writers in this volume.

As noted, a defining quality of authenticity, at least as a topic of academic interest, is its ubiquity. Some useful attention may be paid to the kinds of ‘things’ that the term appears to be frequently attached or related to. Authenticity is central to the branding which pervades contemporary economic, social and cultural life Banet-Weiser (2012), and is claimed by the people making, selling and consuming a plethora of commodities. Studies have therefore found authenticity to be a central feature of the production and consumption of Jeans and trainers (Botterill, 2007), wine (Beverland, 2005), craft beer and artisanal gin (Thurnell-Read, 2019), Scottish whisky (Spracklen, 2011), makeup

(McCabe, de Waal Malefyt, & Fabri, 2020) and vintage cars (Denis, Hummel, & Pontille, 2022).

Many parts of the tourism and heritage industries involve complex decisions about the (re)creation of the past and who can access cultural communities and traditions (Park, Choi, & Lee, 2019; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Authenticity is therefore central to the analysis of tourism and tourist experience (Wang, 1999). Specific locations often give rise to tensions about claims to authorship and ownership of 'real' culture, making authenticity claims a significant feature of many struggles over heritage, culture and place. Indeed, modern cities and the cornucopia of cultural and social occasions and interactions they play host to generate rich and dynamic concerns about authenticity. This is shown, for example, in David Grazian's (2005) ethnographic study of Chicago blues clubs. Cities often manifest processes of globalisation, homogenisation and, increasingly, digitisation, yet the desire for authentic forms of sociability and places survive and continue to appeal to many. While urban spaces are often valorised as sites of creativity and cultural expression, the multiple ways in which cities develop and change through fractious processes of growth, urban renewal and gentrification gives rise to competing claims to authenticity (Zukin, 2008, 2010).

Authenticity is a valued quality in people. The ability of individuals to live an authentic life is most intriguing when those individuals are public figures, celebrities or politicians. Their career, if not entire public persona, centres on their relationship with the varied forms of mediated communication that project to a willing, but often critical, audience (Enli, 2015). For instance, politicians often use social media to construct a popular appeal stemming from their authenticity and relatability (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), while there is now said to be an imperative for business leaders to be seen as authentic individuals, their fitness to lead and inspire other being derived from their own congruity with their personal values (Ibarra, 2015).

Celebrities leverage their 'realness' to establish, sustain and resurrect careers where their authenticity is their central appeal (Genz, 2015). In her seminal study, Camgirls Teresa Senft (2008) explored the concept of 'micro-celebrities' who use the affordances of digital communication platforms to appeal to niche audiences and build their fame and influence on closeness and intimate relationships with their audiences. Scholars studying influencer cultures, such as Crystal Abidin (2018) and Brooke Erin Duffy (2017), then build on this concept of authenticity as perceived 'ordinariness' and relatability of celebrities and explore how authenticity is constructed in para-social relationships between influencers and their followers.

Critically, authenticity may incorporate a confessional quality that Lindholm (2008) traces back to Rousseau. The media is full of genres and formats geared towards the types of candid revelation that are seen as evidence of authenticity. In magazines, where lifestyles and personal values are offered up in candid revelations geared to engender trust and empathy with a given personality (Duffy, 2013), and on chat shows, where a skilled interviewer draws out supposedly honest reflections from the guest on their life, work and values (Van Leeuwen, 2001), authenticity or, at least, the desire for it, is crucial. In the media and cultural sector, an entire industry has grown up around the presentation and managements

of celebrity personas. This is often designed to protect their public image and ensure that fans and audiences only see the 'authentic' celebrity persona.

With celebrities having become the flagbearers of the authentic, much important recent scholarship has sought to chart the dynamic processes by which this ethos and aesthetics of authenticity have filtered into everyday life, suffusing the hopes and fears of so many. Whilst celebrities and other public figures present the most vivid examples of authenticity being an increasingly valued and sought after trait, the perception that authenticity affords access to success and recognition in one's personal and professional life, has become pervasive. [Duffy \(2017\)](#), for example, makes a critical contribution to these debates in exploring the centrality of authenticity to notions of selfhood, lifestyle and labour. Indeed, authenticity seems increasingly important to a generation of young people who have grown in the celebrity-infused era of the internet and social media. Thus, in their study of young people in Australia, [Mendick, Ahmad, Allen, and Harvey \(2018, p. 73\)](#) observe that their research participants investment in authenticity within their own lives and 'actively and critically evaluate celebrities for their authenticity, praising those who they feel have stayed "true to themselves" and criticizing those they deem inauthentic'.

Producing and Communicating Authenticity

In recent decades, the focus of research on authenticity has moved from trying to say what is and isn't authentic to studying the processes by which authenticity is manufactured, narrated and sold. This goes back to Dean MacCannell's (1973) Goffman-influenced treatment of 'staged authenticity', involving a multifaceted effort to create and both literally and metaphorically 'stage' authentic things, people, places and experiences for tourist consumption. This understanding of authenticity as something constructed and presented for consumption is integral to many contemporary analyses. Thus, rather than being fixed, authenticity is something 'worked upon through the narratives and performances that can, for a time, successfully draw on a combination of modes of authenticity in order to tether different meanings and values together in a way that appears congruent with prevailing values, ideals and desires' ([Thurnell-Read, 2019, p. 1463](#)). As such, the methods and processes by which something is accredited with authenticity, and the authority of those who can do this, is in many ways as analytically significant as the thing itself ([Van Leeuwen, 2001](#)). Importantly, authenticity is often the result of the collusion, albeit temporarily, of a range of actors in what [Colucci and Pedroni \(2021\)](#) have recently described as the co-fabrication of authenticity.

In business, 'enterprises generating new economic output are judged predominantly as valuable or invaluable according to whether consumers find it authentic or inauthentic' ([Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p. 43](#)), and Public Relations professionals sell their services on the promise of ensuring organisational messages and actions align so as to preserve the perception of authenticity amongst stakeholders ([Molleda, 2010](#)). The economic and cultural viability of certain commodities rest on the ability to make plausible and convincing 'authenticity claims' ([Ocejo, 2017](#)) through the creation and communication of 'authenticity narratives'