

Authenticity in branding – exploring antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity

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Abstract

Purpose – Consumer demand for authentic brands is steadily rising. With increased pressure to accommodate this demand, researchers and marketers seek to understand how to influence a brand's perceived authenticity. The purpose of this paper is to build a link between previous research on authenticity and thus gain a deeper understanding of the influencing factors of brand authenticity and its consumer outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – Building on an extensive literature review, the authors identify various antecedents of brand authenticity that are closely connected with the brand's past, its virtuousness, consumers' self-identification with the brand perceiver's own self and individuals representing the brand, as well as relational outcomes as consequences of a brand's perceived authenticity. As brand authenticity is a subjective construct, the authors include brand involvement to test for moderator effects. For data collection, they conduct an online survey that generates 509 datasets. To test the hypotheses, the authors use structural equation modeling.

Findings – The results demonstrate that brand authenticity can be influenced by the identified variables (i.e. brand heritage, brand nostalgia, brand commercialization, brand clarity, brand's social commitment, brand legitimacy, actual self-congruence and employee's passion). Moreover, brand authenticity positively affects brand relationship quality, which in turn positively influences consumers' behavioral intentions. The analyzed relationships do not vary due to consumer-specific characteristics (i.e. brand involvement).

Originality/value – In sum, the results regarding the antecedents of brand authenticity demonstrate that a company can influence brand authenticity through different approaches, and that it is therefore important to analyze which of the identified antecedents brand management should manipulate to positively impact the perception of the brand's authenticity. In addition, the findings confirm the positive consequences on consumer behavior ascribed to the authenticity concept by marketing literature.

Keywords Branding, Brand perception, Brand relationships, Brand authenticity

Paper type Research paper



According to Grayson and Martinec (2004), humans have been striving for authenticity for several hundred years. Despite the century-long interest in this human aspiration, the concept of authenticity has only recently captured the attention of marketing researchers as a result of the growing consumer demand for authenticity in purchased products and services. A variety of explanations can be found for this development. On the one hand, it is seen as a reaction to the growing number of serious crises over the past years, such as the financial crisis, current threats to society such as climate change,

frequent scandals caused by managerial misconduct relating to moral issues or simply progressing globalization which increasingly separates people from their national identities (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Fine, 2003). In line with these explanations, Turner and Manning (1988) state that the desire for authenticity is especially strong in times of change and uncertainty, when individuals search for something to rely on that offers them continuity. On the other hand, the need for authenticity is often also seen as a consequence of the increasing homogenization of the marketplace (Beverland and Farelly, 2010). In particular, authenticity serves as evidence of quality and differentiation for consumers. Market transparency, triggered by the communication opportunities of the internet, such as the viral and bi-directional dissemination of information, reinforces the mentioned processes (Eggers *et al.*, 2013). Informed consumers demand consistency and authenticity of their brands and are no longer willing to accept insincere brand behavior (Holt, 2002).

Research has emphasized the increasing relevance that the brand authenticity concept has for the marketing discipline, as voiced by statements such as “consumer’s search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing” (Brown *et al.*, 2003, p. 21), or “Quality no longer differentiates; authenticity does” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007, p. 23), demonstrating the potential that is ascribed to authentic brands. However, a key question that arises in the light of brand authenticity is what determines the perceived authenticity of a brand and which consequences can be attributed to brand authenticity? Thus, despite “authenticity’s long-standing, persistent, and contemporary marketplace appeal” (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 296), companies have little indication of the influencing factors that might be used to promote brand authenticity nor do they know how brand authenticity affects consumer behavior and, in particular, the relational bonds between consumers and their brands.

This knowledge is essential to further confirm the relevance of brand authenticity as a target dimension of marketing management. Even though growing research attention is given to potential antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity, there is still a research gap. So far, various investigations discuss potential influencing factors and consequences of brand authenticity, whereby the majority of previous studies are descriptive and interpretative in nature, are limited to the investigation of selected variables or focus primarily on one specific product or product category (Ewing *et al.*, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, no holistic quantitative investigation has yet analyzed the antecedents of brand authenticity and its relational outcomes across a broad range of brands which differ with regard to their perceived authenticity. Thus, the present paper aims to build a link between previous research on the authenticity formation process and to systematically identify major influencing factors and consequences of brand authenticity. The gained knowledge will provide marketing managers with useful information for designing strategic brand decisions and formulating tactical communication messages that enhance brand authenticity and boost consumer-related outcomes.

To fill this research gap, the remainder of the article proceeds with a literature review of relevant studies which relate to the understanding of the brand authenticity concept, its antecedents and consequences. Therefore, our literature review involves various research disciplines (i.e. philosophy, anthropology, psychology and marketing) to develop a comprehensive understanding of brand authenticity and derive the empirical model. On the basis of the developed brand authenticity conceptualization as well as the

identified research findings regarding potential brand-related antecedents and consequences, our conceptual model is developed. We then conduct the empirical analysis to achieve our research aim. Finally, the results of the present investigation are discussed and managerial implications as well as limitations and questions for further research are highlighted.

Review of the literature

The concept of brand authenticity

Throughout the research disciplines, authenticity is primarily understood as a subject-related behavioral attribute. Within the field of philosophy, researchers closely connect authenticity with moral behavior. In line with this, Taylor (1991) describes self-authenticity as a moral ideal of modernity and adds that authenticity implies that the self is independent and original. According to the existential philosophers Heidegger (1962) and Sartre (1943), individuals are said to be authentic if they are sincere, assume responsibility for their actions and make explicit value-based choices concerning those actions and appearances rather than accepting pre-programmed or socially imposed values and actions.

Within sociology, a common observation stresses that authenticity is not a “real” thing or something that can be objectively determined but rather a socially constructed phenomenon, which is linked to expectations (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009). Fine (2003, p. 155) refers to authentic behavior by stating that authenticity is “linked to an absence of cognitive understanding, creating an unmediated experience – sincere, innocent, original, genuine, and unaffected, distinct from strategic and pragmatic self-presentation”.

Within anthropology, authenticity is mainly related to the preservation of cultural norms, beliefs and values. Handler (1986, p. 2) describes authenticity as a cultural construct of the modern Western world, which stems from the desire for authentic experiences that are characterized as “unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional”. In other words, authenticity has to do with individuals’ “true self”.

Within the field of psychology, authenticity is rooted in subjective internal experiences that have implications for one’s self-knowledge, understanding and relationship behavior. Authentic individuals are opposed to strategic self-expression and an acceptance and alignment of one’s behavior to external influences (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). Authenticity can thus be regarded as the quality of perceived identity with oneself that is experienced as subjective consistency. This reasoning is also supported by self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), according to which individuals are authentic when their actions reflect their true- or core-self; that is, when they are autonomous and self-determining.

Within marketing research, two research streams investigating the concept of authenticity have evolved: authenticity as an attribute of a subject (i.e. employee’s emotional authenticity; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006) or of an object (i.e. brand authenticity; Beverland, 2006). The understanding of brand authenticity is mainly influenced by the conceptualization of Grayson and Martinec (2004). Building on Peirce’s (1998) philosophy of signs as well as MacCannell’s (1973) distinction between “true” (i.e. objectivist perspective) and “staged” (i.e. constructivist perspective) authenticity in tourism, the authors develop a framework to investigate how consumers assess authenticity. In particular, they distinguish two types of authenticity: indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity. This distinction is based on two different frames of reference which are applied when the subject/consumer forms an understanding or perception of a phenomenon (object or event) and attributes the word authentic to it. For example, one consumer may perceive a Bavarian beer brand as being authentic because it is brewed in Bavaria and rooted in the Bavarian beer tradition, whereas another consumer may perceive it as being authentic as long as it conveys the

Bavarian beer culture, regardless of where it is produced and whether it is owned by a Bavarian brewery. While the first perspective – indexical authenticity – “distinguishes ‘the real thing’ from its copies” (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 298) by referring to some verification or a factual or spatio-temporal connection between the brand and some reference point (e.g. owned by a Bavarian monastery brewery), the latter authenticity evaluation – iconic authenticity – constitutes a projection of the consumer’s beliefs about how the brand “ought to look” (e.g. the bottle’s label visualizes the Bavarian monastery brewing tradition; Beverland, 2006). Thus, iconic authenticity is the result of the consumer’s feeling and imagination rather than an evaluation based on evidence (Beverland *et al.*, 2008), whereby the two perspectives – even though conceptually distinct – are not mutually preclusive (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). By distinguishing between indexical and iconic authenticity, Grayson and Martinec (2004) have provided a framework that enhances our knowledge of the authenticity formation process and, in particular, majorly contribute to the understanding of authenticity within consumer research.

Building on the understanding that the consumer’s perceptions of authenticity are based on objective as well as subjective facts, Bruhn *et al.* (2012), Napoli *et al.* (2014) and Morhart *et al.* (2015) develop a measurement scale of brand authenticity. Bruhn and colleagues define brand authenticity as the perceived genuineness of a brand that is manifested in terms of its stability and consistency (i.e. continuity), uniqueness (i.e. originality), ability to keep its promises (i.e. reliability) and unaffectedness (i.e. naturalness). Derived from the findings of Beverland (2006), Napoli *et al.* (2014) identify quality commitment, heritage and sincerity as first-order factors of the brand authenticity scale, whereas the more recent work by Morhart *et al.* (2015) develop a four-dimensional scale to describe a brand’s manifestation of authenticity with the factors of continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. Even though the three measurement scales display deviations (e.g. the consumer’s support of being true to themselves is only captured by Morhart and colleagues), the operationalizations demonstrate substantial similarities, insofar as they all cover the aspects of consistency (i.e. continuity, heritage), honesty (i.e. reliability, quality commitment, credibility) and genuineness (i.e. naturalness, sincerity, integrity). In summary, brand authenticity can be defined as the perceived consistency of a brand’s behavior that reflects its core values and norms, according to which it is perceived as being true to itself, not undermining its brand essence or substantive nature, whereby the perceptual process involves two types of authenticity (i.e. indexical and iconic authenticity).

Antecedents of brand authenticity relevant to marketing

To identify the factors that have an impact on brand authenticity formation, we follow the idea of two different perceptual processes that contribute to forming an authenticity evaluation: indexical and iconic interpretations of variables as antecedents of brand authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Indexical cues are attributes of a brand or its behavior. They are objective sources and provide a verification of what the brand claims to be (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Rather than proving its connection with a reference, iconic cues convey a feeling or an emotional impression of something that influences a brand’s perceived authenticity (Ewing *et al.*, 2012). Thus, just as the perception of brand authenticity may be determined by indexical objective facts relating, for example, to a brand’s behavior, it may also be influenced by iconic subjective interpretations (Kovács *et al.*, 2014), whereby the benefits a consumer perceives from the consumption of indexical or iconic cues deviate (i.e. the benefit of indexical cues: perceived evidence vs the benefit of iconic cues: perceived connection; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). However, as our aim is to study variables that increase the perception of brand authenticity, rather than to analyze how individuals

interpret antecedents of brand authenticity, we take the two perceptual processes as a basis to identify relevant determinants of brand authenticity.

Throughout the literature, influencing factors of brand authenticity are closely connected with the brand's past, its virtuousness, the consumers' self-identification with the brand and employees/individuals representing the brand. In the context of connection with the brand's past, [Beverland \(2006\)](#) as well as [Grayson and Martinec \(2004\)](#) show a positive relationship between factual attributes of a brand (e.g. spatio-temporal link; indexical cue) which connect it with its heritage and tradition, and brand authenticity. The importance of historical brand attributes is further supported by the findings of [Liao and Ma \(2009\)](#), [Spiggle et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Newman and Dhar \(2014\)](#), who demonstrate that both the factual and symbolic maintenance of a brand's style and behavior have a positive effect on authenticity perceptions. Previous research has further demonstrated that communication styles which emphasize a brand's tradition or heritage, but which do not necessarily constitute objective facts proving this connection (i.e. iconic cues), influence a brand's perceived authenticity ([Beverland et al., 2008](#); [Grayson and Martinec, 2004](#); [Morhart et al., 2015](#); [Munoz et al., 2006](#)). Thus, brand heritage seems to be closely related to an authentic brand perception. Moreover, a brand's nostalgic positioning via spatio-temporal or symbolic links, a further form of past-related brand behavior, is discussed as a potential antecedent of brand authenticity ([Leigh et al., 2006](#)). For example, [Cameron and Gatewood \(1994\)](#) identify nostalgia as being one of the ways in which Americans search for authentic experiences. They argue that "alienation is so much a part of contemporary life that people seek to gratify emotional needs for connectedness and community by going back in time (or elsewhere) to find a simpler, gentler life" ([Cameron and Gatewood, 1994](#), p. 30). In line with this, [Baudrillard \(1983\)](#), pp. 12-13) states:

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity.

In other words, in times of transition, people seek authenticity. However, scholars analyzing the authenticity of brands have paid little attention to the impact of brand nostalgia on brand authenticity.

In addition to a brand's perceived connection to its past, a brand's virtuousness can also serve as a potential cue for its authenticity. A brand's virtuousness describes its perceived integrity and absence of ambiguity – whether the brand stays true to itself. In particular, the literature discusses the negative effect that the subordination of values and norms to economic interests (i.e. brand commercialization) has on brand authenticity ([Beverland, 2006](#); [Kates, 2004](#); [Leigh et al., 2006](#)). This is further supported by the findings of [Morhart et al. \(2015\)](#) who identify the negative affect that brand scandals have, as an indexical cue, on the brand authenticity dimension, i.e. integrity. Furthermore, a perceived absence of ambiguity in brand communications is identified as a factor that influences perceived brand authenticity ([Groves, 2001](#); [Liao and Ma, 2009](#)). Thus, the consistency and comprehensibility of a brand's communication activities seem to be a relevant aspect in determining its authenticity, whereas inconsistent brand behavior which subordinates its communicated behavior or identity to profit issues undermines brand authenticity perceptions. This finds further support in the findings of [Morhart et al. \(2015\)](#), who demonstrate that a brand's communicated commitment to go beyond profitability has a positive effect on the brand authenticity dimension, i.e. integrity. In recent years, marketing scholars have increasingly emphasized the key role of socially responsible and environmentally conscious brand behavior in exchange relationships and its potential to achieve competitive advantages ([Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006](#)). However, in the context of brand authenticity, only [Ewing et al. \(2012\)](#) deal with this specific topic and demonstrate that the use of labels which guarantee a

brand's greenness (i.e. indexical cue) as well as the stylized greenness of a brand (i.e. organic look via packaging materials; iconic cue) have a positive effect on brand authenticity. Thus, the effect of a brand's social commitment on brand authenticity perceptions is a topic that demands additional research.

Further influencing factors of authenticity perceptions discussed in the literature refer to the level of consumer-brand identification. This describes the degree to which a consumer views a similarity and connection between him- or herself and the brand (Rifon *et al.*, 2004). In this context, congruence between a brand's values and norms and those of its consumers (i.e. cultural fit) is identified as an important driver of brand authenticity (Beverland and Farelly, 2010; Kates, 2004; Leigh *et al.*, 2006). This positive relationship is supported by the findings of the sociologist Goffman (1959). According to the author, a person or an object whose behavior is coherent with a specific cultural script will be regarded as authentic by that society. In addition, social psychology discusses the perceived consistency of an individual's self-concept as being an influencing factor of perceived authenticity (Kraus *et al.*, 2011). In line with this, Malär *et al.* (2011) mention the fit between a brand's communication style and the consumer's actual self-perception as being a determinant of brand authenticity, presenting one explanation of how emotional brand attachment is formed. Hence, the perceived fit between an individual's self and the brand for instance via cultural legitimacy or self-image congruence can be assumed to enhance the evaluation of a brand's authenticity.

Finally, various studies demonstrate that employees/individuals who represent the brand constitute a critical success factor in forming brand perception (Paul *et al.*, 2015; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). This holds especially for employees of service brands, due to the *uno actu* principle and the immaterial nature of services. In the marketing literature, employee's behavior is discussed as being a factor that influences the perception of brand authenticity (Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). For example, congruent employee brand behavior is demonstrated to have a positive effect on the evaluation of brand authenticity (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Munoz *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, it can be assumed that individuals acting as brand ambassadors enhance a brand's authenticity, as individuals who are intrinsically motivated to fulfill a certain role promote their attribution of authenticity (Wickham, 2013). However, even though employees can serve as an important characteristic of a brand's quality within brand perception, the effects that an employee's role identity, job enthusiasm or identification with the brand have on brand authenticity have not been empirically investigated so far.

To sum up, the literature review reveals various variables as potential antecedents of brand authenticity. However, while some determining effects are confirmed empirically (e.g. congruent employee brand behavior, brand "greenness"), other relationships are primarily discussed as potential explanations for causal effects (e.g. brand commercialization, self-congruence). To fill this research gap, we integrate variables relating to the past (i.e. brand heritage, brand nostalgia), variables encompassing a brand's virtuousness (i.e. brand commercialization, brand clarity, social commitment) and the perceived cultural fit (i.e. brand legitimacy) into our model (Figure 1). Moreover, we include perceived self-congruence with the brand as an additional measure of consumer-brand identification, whereby we distinguish between actual and ideal self-congruence to analyze possible deviations. Finally, employee's passion is integrated to capture the potential effect of individuals representing the brand on authenticity evaluations.

Consequences of brand authenticity relevant to marketing

Concerning the consequences of brand authenticity, authentic brands are associated with various brand-related positive psychological and behavioral consumer outcomes. Regarding the psychological effects of brand authenticity, previous research demonstrates that

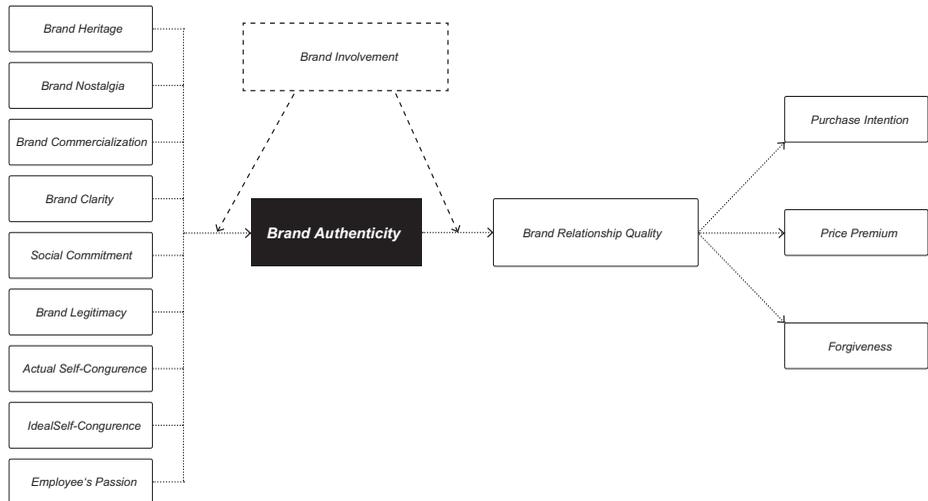


Figure 1.

authenticity perceptions have a positive effect on brand attitude (Ewing *et al.*, 2012; Spiggle *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, Blackshaw (2008) discusses authenticity attributions as influencing factors on a brand's credibility. This finds support by the investigation of Napoli *et al.* (2014) who demonstrate a positive correlation between brand authenticity and its credibility perception as well as brand trust. Moreover, Liu and Jang (2009) discuss the positive effect that authenticity has on satisfaction in the context of restaurants. Within hospitality research, Lu *et al.* (2015) show a positive relationship between perceptions about an ethnic restaurant's authenticity and the brand equity dimensions of brand awareness, brand image and perceived quality. Furthermore, Morhart *et al.* (2015) verify an influencing effect of brand authenticity on emotional brand attachment. The relevance of authenticity for emotional bonds finds further support within the psychology literature, where authenticity is discussed as major determinant of relationship well-being and commitment (Wickham, 2013).

As behavioral consequences of brand authenticity, brand loyalty (Lu *et al.*, 2015), purchase intention (Fang and Zeng, 2015; Lu *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014) and the intention to recommend the brand (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Spiggle *et al.*, 2012) are analyzed. Moreover, Eggers *et al.* (2013) verify a positive relationship between brand authenticity and brand trust as well as small and medium-sized enterprises growth. However, this latter investigation is based on the perception of the considered companies' CEOs rather than its customers.

To sum up, research on the consequences of brand authenticity demonstrates that consumers' authenticity attributions have a beneficial effect on psychological consumer outcomes as well as consumer behavior. However, the effects of authentic brand perceptions on consumer-brand relationship strengthening – as one goal of contemporary marketing (Smit *et al.*, 2007) – are only marginally researched. Within psychology, perceived partner authenticity significantly affects relationship quality evaluations (Wickham, 2013). Thus, transferred to the branding context, it can be assumed that authentic brands are better qualified for the role of being an intimate and long-term partner. To fill this research gap, we include brand relationship quality as central outcome variable in our model and additionally investigate the effect on behavioral variables (i.e. intention to forgive, willingness to pay a premium price, purchase intention).

Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

Research model

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework. The central assumption is that brand authenticity is influenced by the identified variables and that brand authenticity enhances the quality of consumer–brand relationships, which in turn enforces positive behavioral consumer outcomes. However, these relationships may vary depending consumer-specific characteristics (i.e. brand involvement).

Brand heritage is defined as the perceived anchoring of the brand to its tradition, whereby our study focuses on the effect of the brand's strategic positioning on its heritage, rather than the fact that the brand simply has a long history. We define brand nostalgia as the consumer's perception of the nostalgic brand staging. Thus, the conceptualization refers to the brand itself rather than focusing on consumer preferences. The variable, brand commercialization, focuses on the process by which brands subordinate their values and norms to interests of profit maximization (Fine, 2003; Kozinets, 2002; Thompson *et al.*, 2006). According to this definition, the mere fact that a brand pursues a profit motive or that it is moving toward the mass market does not qualify it as a commercial brand. Thus, the key aspect of this definition focuses on the subordination of the brand's values and norms to its financial success. Brand clarity depicts the communicated comprehensibility of the brand's communication style (Erdem and Swait, 1998), whereas the company's social commitment represents the company's assumption of social responsibility. Brand legitimacy, as a variable describing the consumer brand fit, is the brand's degree of integration in the set of values and norms shared by a community (Suchman, 1995). The variables, actual and ideal self-congruence, refer to the consumer's self-concept and are based on the perceived fit of the communicated brand image with the consumer's actual self-image and ideal self-image, respectively (Malär *et al.*, 2011). Finally, to consider the effect of employees who represent the brand, we include perceived employee's passion as an indicator of the perceived enthusiasm and eagerness of the brand's employees in our model.

Moreover, we investigate the effect of the brand's perceived authenticity on brand relationship quality as an indicator of the strength, depth and richness of consumer–brand relationships and its indirect impact on behavioral effects, namely, purchase intention, the willingness to forgive mistakes (i.e. the willingness to give up destructive behaviors and to act in constructive ways; Xie and Peng, 2009) and the willingness to pay a price premium.

Finally, as brand authenticity is a subjective construct, the evaluation of whether a brand is authentic requires cognitive effort on the part of the consumer. Therefore, we examine brand involvement as a moderator variable of the relationship between the antecedents and brand authenticity, as well as the relationship between brand authenticity and brand relationship quality.

Hypotheses development

Determining effects on brand authenticity

Our first hypotheses refer to the impact that variables relating to the past have on brand authenticity. Within the marketing literature, brand heritage is closely associated with brand authenticity (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Peterson, 2005). An explanation for brands which communicates their heritage being perceived as more authentic is the suggestion of their durability and consistency (e.g. Zenith “since 1865”, Guinness “established 1,759”). Through this, a brand appears to be more reliable and continuous, indicating, for example, that a brand has a consistent standard of quality (Beverland, 2006). Finally, brands that have a long history and emphasize this in their brand positioning, such as done by many luxury brands (e.g. Louis Vuitton, Rolex), become increasingly unique for the consumer, as these

connections enrich the brands with inimitable and distinctive attributes (Hakala *et al.*, 2011). This implies that a brand's heritage should constitute an important influencing factor of brand authenticity. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1. Brand heritage has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

Overall, we assume that brand nostalgia has a positive effect on brand authenticity. According to Peterson (2005), brands are perceived as more authentic if their communicative appearance involves "former" values. Thus, a brand's communication style that emphasizes a tie with the past can be assumed to be perceived as original, reliable, continuous and natural, as the nostalgic staging connotes stability, nativeness and uniqueness (e.g. Werther's Original Caramels' commercial "Feel Like a Kid in a Caramel Shoppe Again"). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2. Brand nostalgia has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

Brands that are regarded as being commercial are known for their intensive, even aggressive, marketing actions (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). In contrast, authentic brands appear to be disinterested in or unconcerned with commercial considerations (Beverland, 2006). This observation is supported by numerous scholars who state that commercialization undermines authenticity and can be interpreted as being a contradiction to brand authenticity (Beverland, 2006; Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Chronis and Hampton, 2008; Holt, 2002; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Thompson *et al.*, 2006). In line with this, Kozinets (2002) argues that anti-commercial aspects of a brand constitute symbols of its authenticity. This negative relationship between brand commercialization and brand authenticity can be explained by the fact that brands which subordinate their values and norms to interests of profit maximization are not perceived as unique, reliable, original, integer and sincere (Thompson and Arsel, 2004) – and thus not as authentic. Brands which subordinate their values and norms to interests of profit maximization (i.e. brand commercialization) are therefore assumed to have a negative impact on brand authenticity, and we therefore hypothesize as follows:

H3. Brand commercialization has a negative effect on brand authenticity.

We expect brand clarity to have a positive effect on brand authenticity. Consistency as a quality of a brand's marketing strategy and communication activities enhances brand clarity and the perception that a brand keeps its promises (e.g. Apple's slogan "Think Different", and Audi's slogan "Vorsprung durch Technik"). However, the presence of contradictions in a brand's appearance creates conflicting signals that undermine the brand's image by weakening brand characteristics such as the brand's originality or naturalness, thereby reducing the perception of brand authenticity (Sichtmann, 2007). Moreover, it can be assumed that brand clarity is judged as a sign of reliability by the consumers and can thus positively influence a brand's authenticity (Erdem and Swait, 1998). Furthermore, the investigation of Bruhn *et al.* (2012) reveals that consumers demand that authentic brands present a clear brand appearance that mirrors the brand as being a transparent and unambiguous entity. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H4. Brand clarity has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

Concerning the variable, social commitment, we assume a positive effect on the perceived brand's authenticity, as the assumption of social responsibility is associated with genuine, unique and credible characteristics (Sichtmann, 2007; van Dorn and Verhoef, 2011) – aspects describing the brand authenticity dimensions: naturalness, sincerity and reliability (e.g. TOMS, The Body Shop). In this context, we assume that a company's commitment to social

engagement ascribes high moral values to the brand, enhancing perceptions of its authenticity:

H5. Social commitment has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

The significance of cultural aspects for authenticity attributions is discussed in various articles, as culture is reflected in a brand's production, attributes and value, and generally constitutes the lens through which consumers perceive brands (Kates, 2004; Spiggle *et al.*, 2012). Thus, perceived cultural closeness may enhance authenticity attributions. This assumption finds further support within self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000). According to self-determination theory, humans strive to satisfy their need for relatedness, which describes a sense of belonging and being accepted by significant others. The more a brand represents the values and norms of the important others, the higher the brand's perceived cultural fit will be, thereby impacting consumer preferences (Rose *et al.*, 1994). Kates (2004) ascribes this to the fact that a more authentic brand perception can be attributed to the perception of a brand as a legitimate entity (e.g. Vans within the skateboarding scene, Levis within the gay community). Regarding the variable, brand legitimacy, we therefore expect there to be a positive effect on brand authenticity and hypothesize as follows:

H6. Brand legitimacy has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

In terms of self-congruence, we expect multiple effects on brand authenticity. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance, consumers adjust their behavior to perceived consistency, as inconsistencies provoke discomfort and disharmony (Festinger, 1957). Consequently, consumers prefer brands whose promotional appearance is consistent with their self-concept (e.g. Lane Bryant's campaign "The Perfect Body"). The reason for this preference, according to Gilmore and Pine, is that such an appearance elicits a more authentic brand perception: "People today purchase on the basis of whether a product conforms to their self-image; that alone determines the authenticity of the brand" (Gilmore and Pine in: Weinberger, 2008, p. 42). In line with this, brands whose communication style fits with the consumer's actual self-perception are expected to be perceived as a reflection of an individual's self and therefore are interpreted as unique, genuine and reliable. However, we assume that actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence have distinct effects. Referring to the theory of social comparison, ideal self-congruence can evoke negative feelings if the ideal seems out of reach (Malär *et al.*, 2011). Provoking opposing effects, a compensation of co-existing positive and negative effects seems plausible, wherefore we assume a non-significant effect of ideal self-congruence on brand authenticity.

Thus, the following hypotheses can be put forward:

H7a. Actual self-congruence has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

H7b. Ideal self-congruence has a non-significant effect on brand authenticity.

With regard to the employee-specific variable, we assume that a positive relationship exists between employee's passion and brand authenticity. Building on research that verifies a positive link between consumer's perception of the brand's employees and the perception of the brand (Värlander, 2009), and on the findings of Grandey *et al.* (2005), who successfully show a link between perceived authentic friendliness of service employees and customer satisfaction, we assume that passionate employees are perceived as authentic, which in turn will be attributed to the brand. To ensure that participants are able to evaluate the employee's behavior, the following hypothesis refers solely to service and retail brands, where a direct contact between customer and employee exists. We hypothesize therefore as follows:

H8. The perceived passion of employees has a positive effect on brand authenticity.

Effects of brand authenticity

In terms of the psychological and behavioral variables included in our study, we expect brand authenticity to have a positive influence. According to [Aaker et al. \(2004\)](#), reliability, sincerity, naturalness and steadiness – aspects describing the dimensions of brand authenticity – are influencing factors of the perceived quality of customer–brand relationships. This can be attributed to the fact that authentic brands enhance the consumer’s self-congruence by reinforcing his or her identity ([Beverland and Farelly, 2010](#)). Self-congruence satisfies the need for self-enhancement and supports the consumer’s self-esteem ([Kressmann et al., 2006](#)). As a consequence, consumers who experience self-congruence with a brand appreciate their relationship with the brand more strongly. We therefore assume that brand authenticity has a positive impact on brand relationship quality. Moreover, in accordance with various empirical findings, we expect brand relationship quality to have a strong effect on behavioral outcomes, namely, the willingness to pay a price premium and purchase intention ([Batra et al., 2012](#); [Smit et al., 2007](#)). Furthermore, we expect that brand relationship quality positively influences consumer’s willingness to forgive mistakes. Following [McCullough et al. \(2000\)](#), individuals are more motivated to forgive someone if they have a relationship. Transferred to the branding context, brand relationship quality can therefore be assumed to have a positive effect on forgiveness. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H9. Brand authenticity has a positive effect on brand relationship quality.

H10a. Brand relationship quality has a positive effect on the willingness to pay a price premium.

H10b. Brand relationship quality has a positive effect on purchase intention.

H10c. Brand relationship quality has a positive effect on the willingness to forgive mistakes.

Moderating effects of brand involvement

It is important to note that the hypothesized effects may not be equally pronounced for all consumers. High-involvement consumers are more likely to invest cognitive effort in appraising a brand ([Malär et al., 2011](#)), and authenticity seems to be more relevant to consumers who are involved with the brand ([Beverland, 2006](#)). Moreover, the willingness to start and maintain a relationship is heavily dependent on the imputed individual importance of the brand ([Aaker et al., 2004](#)). Thus, for consumers with a high level of brand involvement, the effect of the identified antecedents on brand authenticity as well as the effect of brand authenticity on brand relationship quality is expected to be stronger, leading to the following hypotheses:

H11a. Brand involvement strengthens the relationships between the antecedents and brand authenticity.

H11b. Brand involvement strengthens the relationship between brand authenticity and brand relationship quality.

Method

Data collection and sample

To test our hypotheses empirically, we conducted an online survey that generated 509 data sets (58 per cent female, 42 per cent male; 50 per cent of the participants are aged between 26

and 30 years, which can be explained by the comparable higher online-affinity of younger age groups). The data were collected via social networking sites and forums covering student platforms as well as platforms that target older age groups. In total, 283 of the 509 data sets refer to brands from the service and retail industry. The survey was undertaken in Germany in 2012, whereby both international and national brands were considered. Overall, 18 brands were included in this survey which covers several industries, including fast-moving and durable consumer goods (e.g. *Kinder* and *Victorinox*), services (e.g. *Google*, *Shell*) and retail brands (e.g. *Aldi*; Table I; for an explanation of the German brands, see Appendix 1). The selection of the 18 brands for the investigation was based on 15 interviews. We used semi-structured interview questions to identify brands that differ with regard to perceived authenticity. The ages of the interviewed consumers ranged from 25 to 64 years, and 53 per cent were female. During the interviews, we first asked about the participant's understanding of authenticity in general and in the brand context. Then, we asked them to name brands they perceive as authentic, inauthentic and brands they would classify as partially authentic (in-between) on an authenticity continuum. By considering the different manifestations of authenticity perceptions, we ensured a high variance (most authentic-rated brand: $M_{Victorinox} = 6.0$; least authentic-rated brand: $M_{Shell} = 2.57$; basis: seven-point Likert scale, results of the main study). Moreover, this procedure allowed us to establish whether consumers share our understanding of brand authenticity. The results of the main study confirm the brand authenticity attribution resulting from the qualitative interviews with one exception (i.e. *Lufthansa*). For a detailed analysis, see Table I. To avoid a possible bias owing to brand familiarity or personal preferences, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the brands. Each respondent answered the questions for only one brand and was asked first to report brand awareness. If the brand was unknown, another brand from the remaining brands was randomly assigned.

Measures

For the measurement of the constructs, we drew on well-established scales used in the literature and adapted them to our research context. In the case of brand heritage, brand commercialization, employee's passion and brand nostalgia, no scales were available in the marketing literature. For this reason, we measured the constructs with multiple items

Authentic brands		Partly authentic brands		Inauthentic brands	
<i>Authenticity ratings as results of the main study</i>					
Victorinox	6.00 (0.55)	Apple	4.94 (0.92)	H&M	3.97 (1.09)
Rothaus	5.62 (1.14)	Volksbank	4.65 (1.18)	Tchibo	3.92 (1.06)
Birkenstock	5.46 (1.23)	Aldi	4.64 (1.44)	McDonald's	3.85 (1.49)
Alnatura	5.40 (1.20)	Kinder Schokolade	4.54 (1.15)	Deutsche Bank	3.00 (1.33)
Fisherman's Friend	5.25 (1.11)			Media Markt	2.77 (1.26)
Google	4.98 (1.24)			Shell	2.57 (1.26)
Balea	4.94 (1.20)				
<i>Lufthansa*</i>	<i>4.41 (1.08)</i>				

Notes: The alignment of the brands is based on the qualitative interviews, and the numbers represented are the results of the quantitative study. The values displayed represent the average authenticity evaluations; the standard deviations are displayed in parenthesis. Some of the brands named in the studies are only known in the area where the study was conducted, and are therefore outlined in Appendix 1; *In the qualitative interviews, *Lufthansa* was rated as an authentic brand, and the results of the main study range the brand as partly authentic

Table I.
Alignment of brands
regarding their
authenticity level

generated on the basis of an extensive literature review. We pre-tested the survey questions verbally with four senior PhD candidates from the research areas of political science, marketing and psychology, as well as one creative director of an advertising agency with more than 10 years of experience in advertising. Herefore, the definitions of each construct involved were presented to the researchers. Next, they were asked to assign the items to the corresponding construct. Discrepancies were discussed. To further validate the new measurement scales, we used an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation. The results clearly support construct validity, as all items distinctly load on the corresponding construct.

In the case of multidimensional constructs (i.e. brand authenticity, brand relationship quality), we followed the suggestions of Little *et al.* (2002) and averaged the values of the second-order factors to reduce the number of parameters in our model. The aggregated second-order factors build the indicators for the higher-level construct (i.e. brand authenticity, brand relationship quality). We measured the constructs with seven-point Likert scales ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Appendix 2 provides an overview of the measurement scales.

Measure reliability and validity of the reflective measurements are assessed using Cronbach’s α and confirmatory factor analysis. Overall, our measurement scales show sufficient reliability and validity, as shown in Appendix 2. More specifically, all factors show a high Cronbach’s α , ranging from 0.843 to 0.984, a value for composite reliability higher than 0.900, and an average variance extracted (AVE) higher than 0.850. All factor loadings are significant ($p < 0.01$), thus supporting convergent validity (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991). Discriminant validity for all our constructs is also given (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), as shown in Table II. Next, we discuss the results of the empirical hypotheses analysis.

Results

To test the assumed relationships, we used structural equation modeling. We analyzed the data using MPlus 7.11. For parametric rating, we applied the maximum-likelihood estimator. As our data are non-normally distributed, we corrected the test statistic according to Santorra and Bentler (1994). In the case of partial analysis (i.e. the service and retail model, moderator analysis), we parceled the items of the constructs that are operationalized by less than three manifest variables (i.e. brand clarity, actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence) to avoid possible Heywood cases (e.g. negative variances; McDonald, 1985). The occurrence of Heywood cases can be due to insufficient sample size (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1984); item parceling is one strategy to counteract these sample-size problems (Bentler and Chou, 1987).

The overall model delivers good fit values (total model: $n = 509$, $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.817$, RMSEA = 0.060, CFI = 0.944, TLI = 0.938; service and retail model: $n = 283$, $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.429$, RMSEA = 0.071, CFI = 0.931, TLI = 0.904). Table III displays the standardized structural coefficients of our model. The results support the hypotheses regarding the identified antecedents. Regarding the variables included as cues of authenticity attribution that relate to the past, we find significant impacts on brand authenticity for brand heritage authenticity ($\gamma = 0.158$, $p < 0.001$; H1) as well as brand nostalgia ($\gamma = 0.078$, $p < 0.001$; H2). Brand commercialization has a significant negative effect on brand authenticity ($\gamma = -0.199$, $p < 0.001$; H3), whereas brand clarity ($\gamma = 0.179$, $p < 0.001$; H4) as well as social commitment ($\gamma = 0.188$, $p < 0.001$; H5) exert a significant positive effect on brand authenticity. Moreover, brand legitimacy ($\gamma = 0.245$, $p < 0.001$) as well as actual self-congruence ($\gamma = 0.171$, $p < 0.001$) have a significant positive effect on the perception of a brand’s authenticity, whereas ideal self-congruence is found to have no impact on brand authenticity ($\gamma = 0.040$, $p > 0.10$), thus

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
<i>n</i> = 509	AVE	0.866	0.909	0.985	0.991	0.935	0.946	0.981	0.953	0.928	0.959	0.973	0.977	0.983	0.967	0.917
1 Brand authenticity	0.866															
2 Brand clarity	0.909	0.437														
3 Actual self-congruence	0.985	0.564	0.307													
4 Ideal self-congruence	0.991	0.453	0.247	0.707												
5 Brand heritage	0.935	0.441	0.256	0.245	0.183											
6 Social commitment	0.946	0.524	0.219	0.382	0.356	0.306										
7 Brand legitimacy	0.981	0.623	0.280	0.667	0.599	0.269	0.573									
8 Brand nostalgia	0.953	0.269	0.141	0.210	0.209	0.251	0.120	0.242								
9 Brand commercialization	0.928	0.498	0.202	0.466	0.387	0.203	0.328	0.394	0.133							
10 Brand relationship quality	0.959	0.557	0.297	0.721	0.717	0.262	0.392	0.646	0.270	0.457						
11 Purchase intention	0.973	0.596	0.278	0.496	0.403	0.208	0.282	0.524	0.195	0.284	0.569					
12 Price premium	0.977	0.524	0.190	0.473	0.394	0.340	0.411	0.483	0.144	0.358	0.494	0.413				
13 Forgiveness	0.983	0.511	0.228	0.554	0.498	0.215	0.316	0.533	0.218	0.424	0.607	0.530				
14 Brand involvement	0.967	0.333	0.193	0.307	0.287	0.058	0.213	0.350	0.092	0.138	0.410	0.166	0.266			
15 Employee's passion <i>n</i> = 283	0.917	0.377	0.102	0.183	0.152	0.213	0.259	0.279	0.035	0.171	0.203	0.226	0.171	0.083		

Table II.
Discriminant validity
of framework
variables

Table III.
Results of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Result
<i>H1</i> . Brand heritage → Brand authenticity	0.158***
<i>H2</i> . Brand commercialization → Brand authenticity	-0.199***
<i>H3</i> . Brand legitimacy → Brand authenticity	0.245***
<i>H4</i> . Employee's passion → Brand authenticity	0.092**
<i>H5</i> . Social commitment → Brand authenticity	0.118***
<i>H6</i> . Brand nostalgia → Brand authenticity	0.078***
<i>H7</i> . Brand clarity → Brand authenticity	179***
<i>H8a</i> . Actual self-congruence → Brand authenticity	0.171***
<i>H8b</i> . Ideal self-congruence → Brand authenticity	0.040 (n.s.)
<i>H9</i> . Brand authenticity → Brand relationship quality	0.856***
<i>H10a</i> . Brand relationship quality → Purchase intention	0.769***
<i>H10b</i> . Brand relationship quality → Price premium	0.722***
<i>H10c</i> . Brand relationship quality → Willingness to forgive mistakes	0.791***

Notes: All coefficient values are standardized values; $n = 509$; $n_{\text{employee's passion}} = 283$; *** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$

allowing *H6* to *H7b* to be accepted. Consistent with *H8*, employee's passion ($\gamma = 0.092$, $p < 0.01$) has a significant positive effect on brand authenticity. Overall, the included antecedents explain 89 per cent of the variance of brand authenticity.

Concerning the consequences of brand authenticity, the results support *H9*, implying that brand authenticity positively influences brand relationship quality ($\gamma = 0.856$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, the assumed positive relationships between brand relationship quality and purchase intention ($\gamma = 0.769$, $p < 0.001$), price premium ($\gamma = 0.722$, $p < 0.001$) and willingness to forgive mistakes ($\gamma = 0.791$, $p < 0.001$) are confirmed, leading to the acceptance of *H10a* to *H10c*.

We investigate the possible moderating effect of brand involvement by implementing a multi-group analysis. To create two sub-groups (i.e. low- and high-involvement consumers), we implement a median-split along the values of the moderator. To test for significant differences between the low- and high-involvement consumers, we use a χ^2 -difference test using the robust Santorra and Bentler statistic, to compensate deviations from normality distribution (Bentler, 1992). Prior to the analysis, we test for configural and metric invariance. For this purpose, we use confirmatory factor analysis. The results strongly support the requirement that configural and metric invariance is achieved (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998). Contrary to our expectations, the analyzed relationships majorly do not vary when taking brand involvement as consumer-specific characteristic into account. The χ^2 -difference test only demonstrates a significant effect of the moderator on the relationship between brand heritage and brand authenticity ($\Delta\chi^2_{\text{Heritage}} = 4.131$, $\Delta\text{df} = 1$, $p < 0.05$) as well as between brand authenticity and brand relationship quality ($\Delta\chi^2_{\text{Brand relationship quality}} = 30.720$, $\Delta\text{df} = 1$, $p < 0.001$). However, the data show that the relationships have a significantly stronger effect for low-involvement consumers than for high-involvement consumers. Thus, *H11a* and *H11b* have to be rejected.

Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to improve our knowledge of the influencing factors of brand authenticity and its consumer outcomes. Therefore, the current investigation connects previous research on authenticity and empirically tests a model of brand authenticity which

incorporates antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity that influence a brand's success. Overall, four key findings can be derived from our results.

The first finding focuses on the formation process of brand authenticity. The results show that brand authenticity is influenced by variables that are closely connected with the brand's past (i.e. brand heritage, brand nostalgia), its virtuousness (i.e. brand commercialization, brand clarity, social commitment), employees representing the brand (i.e. employee's passion) and the consumers' self-identification with the brand (i.e. brand legitimacy, actual self-congruence). In line with our assumptions, ideal self-congruence exerts no significant effect on brand authenticity, whereas actual self-congruence exerts a positive effect. To positively influence authenticity perceptions, the brand's positioning should be oriented toward the consumers' real self-perception. Thus, our results provide one empirical explanation for the success of advertising campaigns which do not focus on consumers' ideals but focus instead on their real self-awareness, as is the case with Dove's real beauty campaign.

Second, we present empirical support for the widespread presumption that brand authenticity generates enhanced emotional bonds between the consumer and the brand. In particular, brand authenticity is proven to primarily influence brand relationship quality, which is certified by the high explanatory power of brand authenticity with a R^2 -value of brand relationship quality of 0.737. Thus, the perceived authenticity of a brand fosters strong emotional bonds between a consumer and the brand, which in turn enhances consumer loyalty (i.e. purchase intention, the willingness to pay a price premium), as well as consumer tolerance for bad brand experiences (i.e. the willingness to forgive mistakes). These results underscore the importance of brand authenticity for marketers.

The third finding concerns the counterintuitive effects found for the moderator, brand involvement. Although we expect positive moderating effects for high-involvement consumers, the results reveal mostly comparable effect sizes. One possible explanation is the existence of different causal mechanisms for high- and low-involvement. For highly involved consumers, the brand is of great personal relevance, and they show a more distinct perception of a brand's attribute differences (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Thus, consumers with high brand involvement can be assumed to be highly aware of different brand attributes and also to ascribe greater importance to these aspects with regard to the brand's authenticity. However, consumers with low brand involvement do not have such detailed brand knowledge (Zaichkowsky, 1985), which indicates that authenticity evaluations seem to be interrelated with a requirement of high cognitive effort. The identified antecedents of brand authenticity may therefore be used as signals or cognitive anchors that elicit authenticity attributions. These two distinct mechanisms (i.e. high-involvement: high awareness of brand attributes, attributes of great importance vs low-involvement: low awareness of brand attributes, attributes as a cognitive anchor) might lead to comparable effect sizes. Using a series of ANOVAs, we find first indications for these assumptions. In particular, the evaluations of the involved antecedents as well as of brand authenticity are found to be more pronounced for high-involvement consumers than for low-involvement consumers supporting different interdependencies.

However, contrary to this, within our empirical study, we find a more pronounced effect of brand heritage on brand authenticity for low-involved consumers. Compared to the evaluation of brand clarity or brand nostalgia, for example, the presence of a brand's aspect signaling its heritage does not require an alignment of various perceptions or the interpretation of a communication style and is therefore relatively easy to assess. Hence, brand heritage may be less persuasive for high-involvement consumers, due to their high need for information; conversely, it may be more persuasive for low-involvement consumers

for the opposite reason. This is in line with the findings of Ewing *et al.* (2012), who demonstrate that sustainability certifications (i.e. cues of the brand's greenness that are easy to assess) have a more pronounced effect on green belief via authenticity for low-involvement products than is the case for high-involvement products. Thus, signals that can be easily processed cognitively may be more persuasive for low-involvement consumers compared to high-involvement ones. Moreover, we find that brand authenticity has a more pronounced effect on brand relationship quality for low-involvement consumers than for high-involvement ones, which may be explained by the fact that low-involvement consumers show no brand preference, whereby the perceived authenticity of a brand is more strongly used as a signal of a brand's quality as relationship partner. However, future research focusing on the assumed differences in the perceptual processes is needed, to provide concrete recommendations for the management practice.

Finally, the fourth finding concerns the conceptualization of brand authenticity in marketing research. Overall, our results demonstrate the suitability of the understanding of authenticity and, in particular, brand authenticity within the literature, as variations in the attribution of authenticity among brands (i.e. brand authenticity evaluations within the qualitative interviews) produce variations in the measurement scale (i.e. brand authenticity evaluations within the quantitative study; Table I). Moreover, our findings demonstrate that innovative, global brands (i.e. *Google*, $M_{\text{Brand Authenticity}} = 4.89$), as well as traditional regional brands (i.e. *Rothaus*, $M_{\text{Brand Authenticity}} = 5.62$), can be perceived as authentic. Interestingly, this is also valid for purely profit-oriented brands such as discounters (i.e. *Aldi*, $M_{\text{Brand Authenticity}} = 4.64$) as well as for the private labels of retailers (i.e. *Balea*, $M_{\text{Brand Authenticity}} = 4.95$). Thus, the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity is not limited to moral behavior or to tradition, but rather to the brand's consistency and remaining true to itself, which confirms the authenticity conception of the different research disciplines discussed within our literature review.

The findings provide several insights, not only for academics but also for marketing practice. Our examination supports the assumptions that a company can influence its authentic brand perception via various cues. Interestingly, the perceived cultural fit between the consumer and the brand (i.e. brand legitimacy) exerts the strongest effect on brand authenticity, supporting the often-discussed relevance of cultural proximity as a significant driver of the authentication process (Beverland and Farelly, 2010; Kates, 2004). Thus, brand managers should understand the culture of their target consumers and investigate the symbols and behavior which represent their values and norms, to integrate these aspects within the brand culture.

Moreover, the highly positive effect of brand clarity (i.e. a communication style enhancing clarity and traceability of brand positioning) as well as the highly negative effect of brand commercialization (i.e. brand behavior that subordinates its initial values to profit maximization) demonstrate the importance of consistency or the degree of harmony between a brand's behavior and what it purports to be. To enhance a brand's authenticity perception, brand managers should therefore implement a policy that presents an unchanging/enduring brand image/identity that covers the brand's values, norms and mission as well as all its communication activities. In particular, to avoid the pitfalls of inconsistent brand behavior and to ensure a brand's authenticity, companies are advised to abstain from some – often short-termed – marketing actions: no brand can afford to engage in implementing short-term price-campaigns, aggressive or unsubstantiated advertising campaigns, unbelievable testimonials, use communication instruments or distribution channels that conflict with its original essential identity.

Finally, brand managers should note that the perceived brand identification of frontline employees plays an important role in driving consumers' authenticity perceptions and is therefore relevant for consumers' behavioral outcomes. When interacting with highly intrinsically motivated employees, consumers are more likely to perceive the brand as authentic. Hence, the brand will be evaluated more positively, enhancing mutual understanding as well as the intention for long-term relationships. Thus, companies should recruit, select, train and motivate frontline employees to perform their service roles in an eager manner.

Taken collectively, our results demonstrate that brand managers can influence the authenticity perception of their brands in various ways. Moreover, the positive effect of brand authenticity on brand relationship quality highlights the relevance of our findings, not only for short-term brand perceptions but also for their consumers' willingness to engage in long-term relationships.

Although the present research extends the conceptualization of brand authenticity by exploring its antecedents and consequences, it is not without limitations. We use the concept of indexicality and iconicity to derive the pool of potential antecedents. However, within our survey, we do not distinguish between the participants' indexical or iconic interpretations of the included variables. Hence, based on the current findings, it is not possible to make a reliable statement about how the interpretation of the various antecedents (i.e. iconic vs indexical cues) can be used to increase the perception of brand authenticity. Consequently, we do not analyze possible interaction effects of indexical and iconic cues. Future research could also investigate potential supporting effects of the indexical and iconic cues identified on brand authenticity formation following the study of [Ewing et al. \(2012\)](#). This would provide important practical insights on how marketers can best influence brand authenticity.

In addition, future research concerning the long-term consequences of brand authenticity would be interesting. While we show that brand authenticity impacts behavioral intentions, it is still questionable whether brand authenticity impacts customer lifetime value, for example, and therefore builds customer equity. Future research might also consider a comparison of the determinants and consequences of brand authenticity across cultures, as certain antecedents, such as actual self-congruence, are assumed to be weighted differently in different cultures.

Even though our study considers a service- and retail-specific variable, further insights about authenticity attribution through services and the impact of authenticity on the perception of the service interaction would be interesting. So far, some studies have investigated the effects of authentic smiles given by service employees ([Grandey et al., 2005](#); [Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006](#)). However, a comprehensive consideration of the consumer's perceived authenticity of service encounters would be interesting.

In sum, the results regarding the antecedents of brand authenticity demonstrate that a company can influence brand authenticity by using different approaches, and it is therefore important to analyze which factors (i.e. a brand's past, its virtuousness, employees/individuals representing the brand, consumers' self-identification with the brand) can be manipulated by brand management to positively impact the perception of the brand's authenticity. Moreover, brand authenticity seems to be a crucial success factor for brands, as our results highlight its impact on key marketing outcome variables.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1

Aldi: Aldi is a discount chain for groceries.

Alnatura: Alnatura is a retail brand in the biological grocery sector. Alnatura offers groceries and textiles which are fabricated according to ecological standards and certified by an independent, accredited institution for organic product testing.

Balea: Balea is a private body- and hair-care brand of a drugstore chain.

Media Markt: Media Markt is a retail chain for electronic equipment.

Rothaus: Rothaus is a traditional beer brand from the Black Forest region of Southern Germany.

Tchibo: Tchibo is a consumer goods brand and a retail chain. Originally, Tchibo sold coffee; nowadays, Tchibo's product portfolio comprises, inter alia, coffee, clothes and technical equipment. The brand also operates as a service provider for telecommunications and as a travel agency.

Volksbank: Volksbank is a mutual savings bank.

Constructs and items	IR	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
<i>Brand authenticity</i> (Bruhn <i>et al.</i> , 2012)		0.897	0.961	0.866
Continuity	0.555			
Originality	0.528			
Reliability	0.802			
Naturalness	0.836			
<i>Brand clarity</i> (adapted from Erdem and Swait, 1998)		0.863	0.952	0.909
	0.704			
	0.822			
<i>Actual self-congruence</i> (Malär <i>et al.</i> , 2011)		0.958	0.993	0.985
	0.858			
	0.987			
<i>Ideal self-congruence</i> (Malär <i>et al.</i> , 2011)		0.984	0.996	0.991
	0.983			
	0.954			
<i>Brand commercialization</i> (new scale)		0.922	0.981	0.928
	0.636			
	0.847			
	0.897			
	0.658			

Table AI.

(continued)

Constructs and items	IR	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
<i>Brand nostalgia</i> (new scale)		0.952	0.988	0.953
I associate the brand <i>brand</i> with experiences from my childhood	0.927			
I associate the brand <i>brand</i> with experiences from former times	0.952			
The communication style of <i>brand</i> reminds me of "the good old days"	0.734			
For me, <i>brand</i> is a symbol of my childhood/youth	0.695			
<i>Brand heritage</i> (new scale)		0.944	0.983	0.935
<i>Brand</i> is a brand with tradition	0.731			
The brand <i>brand</i> is characterized by its own history	0.790			
The promises of <i>brand</i> are closely linked to its tradition	0.852			
The brand <i>brand</i> is conscious of tradition	0.855			
<i>Brand legitimacy</i> (adapted from Rifon <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Suchman, 1995)		0.973	0.994	0.981
The brand <i>brand</i> is congruent with the moral principles of the culture I feel close to	0.903			
The brand <i>brand</i> fits well with my cultural views	0.943			
The brand <i>brand</i> is compatible with the values and norms of the community I belong to	0.934			
<i>Social commitment</i> (adapted from Valentine and Fleischman, 2008)		0.946	0.981	0.946
<i>Brand</i> assumes social responsibility	0.886			
<i>Brand</i> invests in the greater community	0.865			
<i>Brand</i> is socially engaged	0.810			
<i>Employee's passion</i> (new scale, $n = 283$)		0.947	0.978	0.917
I have the feeling that the employees like working for <i>brand</i>	0.805			
The employees identify themselves with the brand <i>brand</i>	0.788			
I perceive the employees of <i>brand</i> as being motivated	0.788			
The employees enjoy working for <i>brand</i>	0.905			
<i>Brand relationship quality</i> (adapted from Aaker <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Fournier, 1994; Kressmann <i>et al.</i> , 2006)		0.963	0.989	0.959
If the brand <i>brand</i> were a person, ...				
Love and passion ... I would express deep and strong feelings for him/her	0.882			
... I would want him/her to keep me company when I feel lonely				
... we would be 'meant for each other'				
Interdependence ... he/she would play an important role in my life				
... I would be used to having him/her around	0.855			
... I could not live without him/her				

(continued)

Table AI.

Constructs and items	IR	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Intimacy	0.898			
... we would be close friends				
... we would understand each other				
... I would feel comfortable sharing detailed personal information about myself with him/her				
Partner quality	0.823			
... he/she would treat me well				
... he/she would do his/her work well				
... I could rely on him/her				
<i>Purchase intention</i> (adapted from Dodds <i>et al.</i> , 1991)		0.960	0.991	0.973
The likelihood of purchasing this brand is high	0.843			
The probability that I would consider buying this brand is high	0.868			
My willingness to buy this brand is high	0.950			
<i>Premium price</i> (adapted from Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> , 1996)		0.970	0.992	0.977
The brand <i>brand</i> justifies higher prices	0.918			
Paying a higher price for <i>brand</i> is worth it	0.943			
In my experience, a higher price for <i>brand</i> is fair	0.888			
<i>Willingness to forgive mistakes</i> (adapted from Xie and Peng, 2009)		0.978	0.994	0.989
I think I can forgive <i>brand</i> mistakes	0.931			
I am lenient when <i>brand</i> makes mistakes	0.948			
Mistakes made by <i>brand</i> are excusable	0.936			
<i>Brand involvement</i> (adapted from Zaichkowsky, 1985)		0.956	0.984	0.967
The brand <i>brand</i> is important to me	0.880			
The brand <i>brand</i> is of relevance to me	0.929			
The brand <i>brand</i> matters to me	0.831			

Table AI.

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