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Leveraging Authenticity in Branding: Empirical Study on Startup Brands

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Abstract

Authenticity is becoming one of the cornerstones in branding. Consumers make purchases increasingly with the motive to strengthen their identities and show their values outside. In order for brands to stay ahead of the competition, they need to incorporate values and identity into their marketing which the consumers can pick on.

However, while this sounds simple, there are a lot of stepping stones in the way. A lot of brands are failing by communicating according to trends without thinking if those are aligned with the values, while other brands communicate values a lot but the products and/or employees are telling a different story.

I study branding in startups from the view of authenticity. By interviewing six startup founders / C-level employees and two senior employees of a creative agency, I get a close look at what branding efforts should be done in order to get favorable authenticity evaluations from audiences.

Brand authenticity is something that can be built and managed through certain identifiable internal operation - external inducement -combinations, which lead to certain motives and experiences in the audience to trigger, making them evaluate the brand as more authentic.

My evidence shows that building and managing brand authenticity starts with deciding and always staying true to the company's core values and mission. These guide every action the company makes, leading to the audience seeing that brand as consistent and being able to trust it. This confirms the view on existing literature that much of a brand's authenticity is based on consistency. Yet, there are also ways to amplify the consistency effect on authenticity as well as other means to achieve authentic evaluations from the audience.

Keywords:

Brand, authenticity, marketing, competition, consistency

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Tiivistelmä

Autenttisuudesta on tullut lähtemätön osa brändäämistä. Kuluttajat haluavat brändeiltä tukea oman identiteetin rakentamiseen sekä omien arvojen esiintuomiseen. Tämä aiheuttaa brändeille tarpeen panostaa autenttisuuteensa, tuoda brändin ja yrityksen arvoja paremmin esille ja rakentaa brändin identiteettiä enemmän kuluttajien identiteettejä tukevaksi.

Tutkin brändäystä startup-yrityksissä autenttisuuden näkökulmasta. Haastatteleamalla kuutta startup-yrittäjää / johtajaa sekä kahta luovan toimiston seniori työntekijää, perehdyn syvällisesti siihen, mitkä toimenpiteet brändäyksessä saavat aikaan toivottavia reaktioita yleisössä mahdollistaen autenttisuuden rakentumisen.

Löydösteni perusteella brändin autenttisuus rakentuu kolmelle tekijälle: 1) yleisön motiivit ja kokemukset vaikuttavat autenttisuuden syntyyn, 2) yleisön motiivien ja kokemusten vahvistuminen perustuu tiettyihin brändin ulkoisiin vaikuttimiin, sekä 3) yleisö peilaa brändin ulkoisia vaikuttimia tiettyihin yrityksen sisäisiin operaatioihin. Löydökset vahvistavat aikaisempien tutkimusten näkemystä brändin autenttisuuden muodostumisesta isolta osin johdonmukaisuuteen/yhtenevyyteen. Löydökset kuitenkin kertovat myös, että on muitakin tapoja, joilla voi sekä vahvistaa yhtenevyyden vaikutusta, että saada yleisön muiden motiivien ja kokemusten kautta näkemään brändi autenttisena.

Diplomityöni viittaa, että brändin autenttisuus on asia, jota voi rakentaa ja hallita tiettyjen tunnistettavien sisäinen operaatio - ulkoinen vaikutin -yhdistelmien kautta, jotka johtavat yleisössä tiettyjen motiivien ja kokemusten vahvistamiseen, saaden heidät näkemään brändi autenttisempänä.

Avainsanat:

Brändi, autenttisuus, markkinointi, kilpailu, startup, johdonmukaisuus, yhtenevyys

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and motivation

Branding is something that creates intangible value on products. Product features can be whatever they are, but when branding is done right, consumers are willing to pay more for those same features. For example, while Apple's smart phones might not be that extraordinary when comparing them to Samsung, OnePlus, and Huawei, they are the most expensive and they still sell like there is no tomorrow. Yet, even more interesting is how some people start to promote a company even when they do not use its products. A perfect example of this is Tesla - one of my friends has been promoting Tesla in every occasion where cars are brought in to a conversation. He does not own a car, neither does he drive cars that often. Yet, still he talks about Tesla like he worked as a salesman there.

But how can one build a brand like Tesla - a brand which is the definition of its category (electric vehicles) and something that even non-customers actively promote? There is clearly something more going on than just perfecting the marketing message of the features of a product.

Consumerism has become more and more about voting with money. Authenticity is something that consumers nowadays require increasingly - while products need to still solve problems first, consumers tend to pick the solutions, from the available competition, that are the most

authentic to them. As Potter (2010) describes, the demand for authenticity is one of the most powerful movements in modern life.

Using authenticity as a branding tool is tricky since praising one's own authenticity often backfires (Kovacs et al. 2017). There are certain factors in the company's internal operations, the brand's external inducements and the audience's motives and experiences, that form the authenticity for a brand when properly combined.

1.2 Research Problem, objectives and scope

Existing literature has become quite well rounded on authenticity. There is a widespread agreement on the basic meaning of it, although more precise meanings vary. Consumers' perspective on authenticity is very well researched - how do consumers see things, objects, and matters as authentic. Yet, not as much research exists on how to actually leverage authenticity for growing a brand and a business.

My study aims to find answers to how can a startup leverage authenticity for building its brand. By interviewing founders of successful startups and senior employees of a creative agency company, I aim to get a wide view to what aspects are considered the most important in building an authentic brand and how those are managed in day-to-day business and marketing campaigns. This leads to my research questions to become: **“What aspects are considered**

important in building an authentic brand?” and “How can a startup best leverage authenticity in building its brand?”.

Combining literature review and empirical part with semi-structured interviews, the study provides an accurate view on utilizing authenticity for branding in startups. Eight people were interviewed of which six were startup founders / C-level employees and the remaining two were senior employees of a creative agency. Both the literature review and the interview data suggest that brand authenticity is mostly based on consistency between brand's actions and the company's values leading the audience to trust the brand. However, the interviewees also emphasized that the audience should be able to identify with the brand which can be achieved through storytelling with the company's values and mission present. Also, customer value and ability to influence the brand were considered important factors when the audience evaluates authenticity of a brand.

1.3 Structure of Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In this first chapter I gave a quick introduction to authenticity in branding and my motivation to research this topic. In addition, I introduced the research problem, objective and scope, as well as the research questions.

In the second, third and fourth chapters I dive into the existing literature on branding and authenticity. First, I briefly introduce the link between branding and business performance.

Then, I explore authenticity and its different meanings. Finally, I explore the different ways how a brand can leverage authenticity, in theory.

In the fifth chapter I introduce how this research was completed in general. I will present the research design, process, and methodology used in gathering and analyzing the data. In addition, I will show the composition of the interviewees.

In sixth and seventh chapter I present the results from my empirical study and discuss their significance as well as provide recommendations for brand managers. Finally, I conclude the study and discuss the implications and limitations of the thesis and suggest areas for further research.

2 Value of a brand for a business

In the following literature review, I will provide a theoretical foundation for this research. I will start with brief explanation of branding and its value for business. Then, I will move to describe the role authenticity plays in branding. Lastly, I will explain in detail how authenticity is constructed and what different ways there is to manage it as a feature of a brand.

Brand creates significant value for a business. In competitive markets, brands are what differentiates products from each other. It is argued that nearly two out of three customer purchases are driven by brand (Davis and Halligan, 2002) - leading to stronger brands taking a bigger portion of their market for themselves, thus bringing in higher sales than those with mediocre brands. Davis and Halligan (2002) even argue that brand has impact to almost every dimension of business. Madden et al. even show in their article (2006) how a strong brand not only creates greater value for shareholders than a relevant benchmark but also does it with less risk.

In this chapter I will briefly explain the most common terminology in branding as well as its value for customer retention and customer acquisition.

2.1 Basics and terminology

Brand equity is the most common term for measuring brand value. Its definition already shows its link to the business value. Keller (1993) defines it as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand. A brand is said to have positive (negative) customer-based brand equity when consumers react more (less) favorably to an element of the marketing mix for the brand than they do to the same marketing mix element when it is attributed to a fictitiously named or unnamed version of the product or service.” Hence, brand equity adds value on top of the perceived value of the product and customers are ready to pay more for it. However, brand equity is difficult to measure (Taylor et al., 2004), which is why it is often divided into more concrete measuring tools.

Other common terms in branding are **brand awareness**: “How the brand has to be identified by the buyer for purchase consideration” (Rossiter, 2014), **brand image**: “the emotional aspects that identify the brand of a company or its products, and has a powerful impact on consumer buying behavior” (Arora and Stoner, 2009), and **brand experience**: “sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments.” (Brakus et al., 2009).

2.2 Customer retention

Zhang et al. show in their article (2010) that a link between customer loyalty and customer lifetime value exists in consumer-packaged goods businesses - consumers who stay faithful to a brand, bring in more cash in the long run. Usually customer loyalty is seen coming from satisfaction - when the customer is treated well, they will be happy to do more business with the brand. However, an interesting note is that Taylor et al. (2004) argue that although brand equity has a direct correlation to customer loyalty, customer satisfaction does not (although it is not worthless).

Stahl et al. (2012) show how brand equity is also strongly associated with customer lifetime value and all its components which are, according to Stahl et al., customer profitability, customer retention, and customer acquisition, and that especially brand awareness is linked to all three of these.

2.3 Customer acquisition

Word of mouth is my personal favorite of all, since it can stem from both great customer experience but also solely through robust branding. As in the case of my friend speaking for Tesla without being a customer to them, word of mouth can be, when branding is done right, fueled even with non-customers.

In the case of how branding can affect new customer acquisition, brand awareness, brand image, and brand experience play a large role. Brand experience is associated with word of mouth (Klein et al., 2016) while brand awareness is more of a requirement for a consumer to even consider a brand as an option (Ansary et al., 2018). Both brand awareness and brand image affect consumers' purchase decisions - consumers are more likely to buy from a certain brand when they are able to make more meaningful associations with the brand (Ansary et al., 2018).

Lovett et al. explain in their article (2013) the different ways how branding increases word of mouth, not only online through social and functional drivers, but also offline through emotional drivers. They argue that the main social driver is to show one's expertise, uniqueness or social status to other people, whereas the emotional driver is to share feelings about brands to balance emotional arousal, while the functional driver is to share information. These researchers identified several brand characteristics which may stimulate word of mouth among customers. For example, level of differentiation of brand stimulates word of mouth since it is easier to show one's own uniqueness through highly differentiated brand. (Lovett et al. 2013).

Word of mouth can also hurt brand equity. In the case of online word of mouth, Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) show how negative online product reviews have diluting effect on consumer-based brand equity.

3 Authenticity

The widely accepted meaning of authenticity is “something that is genuine or real or true” (Lehman et al. 2019). Yet, the studies on authenticity vary a lot on how they actually interpret authenticity. But before diving more into the meaning of authenticity, why is it an important topic in branding? Why do consumers prefer authentic brands?

3.1 Consumer motives

Consumers' purchase decisions are motivated by cues in objects that convey authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Potter (2010) writes that the demand for authenticity is one of the most powerful movements in modern life. Trilling already anticipated, in his seminal work from 1972, that the demand for authenticity will rise as a response to modernization. Thompson et al. further elaborate (2006) that the heightened desire for authenticity actually derives from how the marketplace has become standardized and homogenous.

According to Arnould and Price (2000) consumers try to find more meaning in their lives, which leads to them preferring brands and experiences that reinforce their desired identity. Basically this means that consumers make purchase decisions to show who they are or who they want to be. Arnould and Price further explain this by telling that consumers purposefully link objects and experiences to the stories of the self. Another motivation for consumers to pursue

authenticity in their purchases is to gain status (Leigh et al., 2006), or sense of belonging or freedom (Quester et al. 2006).

3.2 Context dependency

As said above, authenticity refers to that which is genuine or real or true. But in more precise interpretation there is no clear consensus. Important point is that authenticity is not considered to be unambiguous. According to Kovacs et al. (2014) “authenticity is ultimately not about the facts per se but rather about interpretations regarding those facts”. Peterson (2005) elaborates further by saying that authenticity is not a characteristic of an object or entity, but instead, “a claim that is made by or for them and either accepted or rejected by relevant others”. Thus, authenticity is socially constructed (Peterson 2005). Lehman et al. (2019) conclude this by explaining that an object is authentic by being a real “something”, or genuine “something”, or true to “something” - thus revealing that authenticity truly stems from the audience who judges the realness, the truth, or the genuineness of the object/entity.

And yet even this meaning of authenticity is not all-inclusive. To make matters even more complicated, the meaning that the referent gives to authenticity is considered to be context and goal dependent (Leigh et al., 2006; Wang, 1999; Rose and Wood, 2005). Some scholars argue that the authenticity of an entity may change over time depending on the context - even in the case of the referent being the “true self”, there is tension between the constant and the evolving nature of the referent (Lehman et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Beverland and Farrelly describe in their article (2010) that same product can have different meanings for different customers. It is even argued that an object that one consumer deems completely fake or unreal, another consumer might find very authentic by finding meaningful traits in it to them (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood 2005). See Figures 1a and 1b for schematic presentation of the time and viewer dependent determination of authenticity.

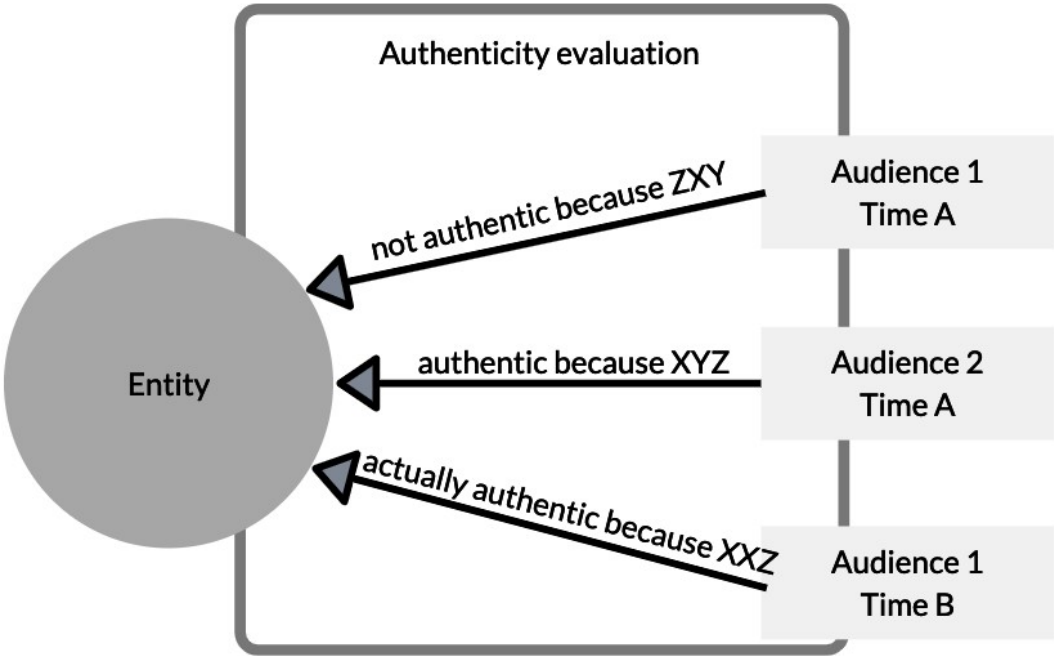


Figure 1a: Determination of authenticity depends on time and audience.

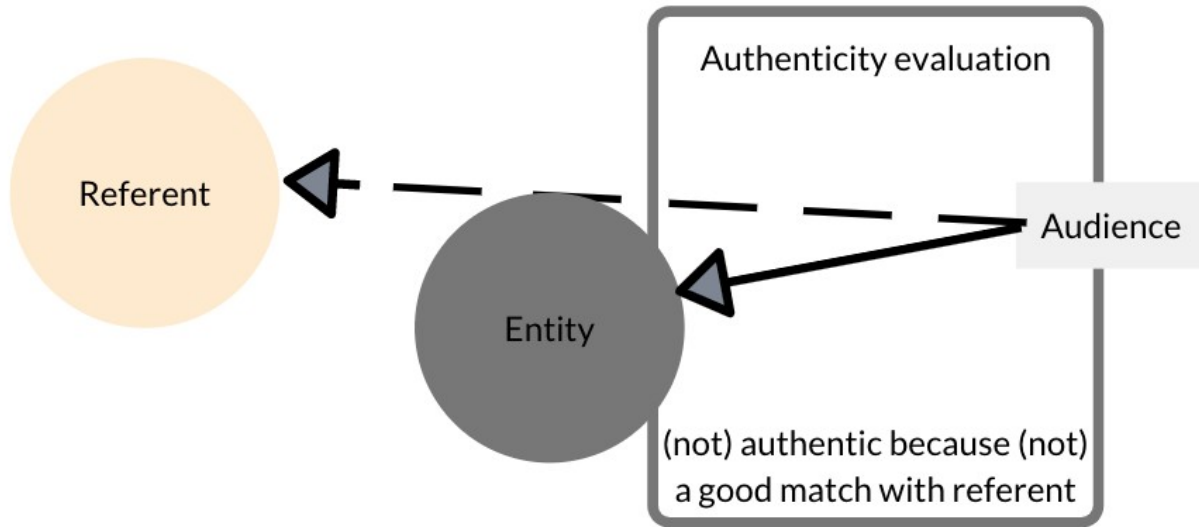


Figure 1b: Determination of authenticity depends on the referent (what the entity represents)

3.3 Perspectives in authenticity research

According to Lehman et al. (2019), most of the research on authenticity can be divided into three different categories: authenticity as consistency, authenticity as conformity, and authenticity as connection. These three categories all share things in common and have implications for brand authenticity. However, they are also decisively different when considering how a brand should leverage them.

Explained already above, authenticity depends on both time and viewer. However, with these three different categories for authenticity, also the referent of the judgment becomes an important factor that has impact on the evaluation of authenticity (Lehman et al. 2019). Figure 2 shows the different categories of authenticity.

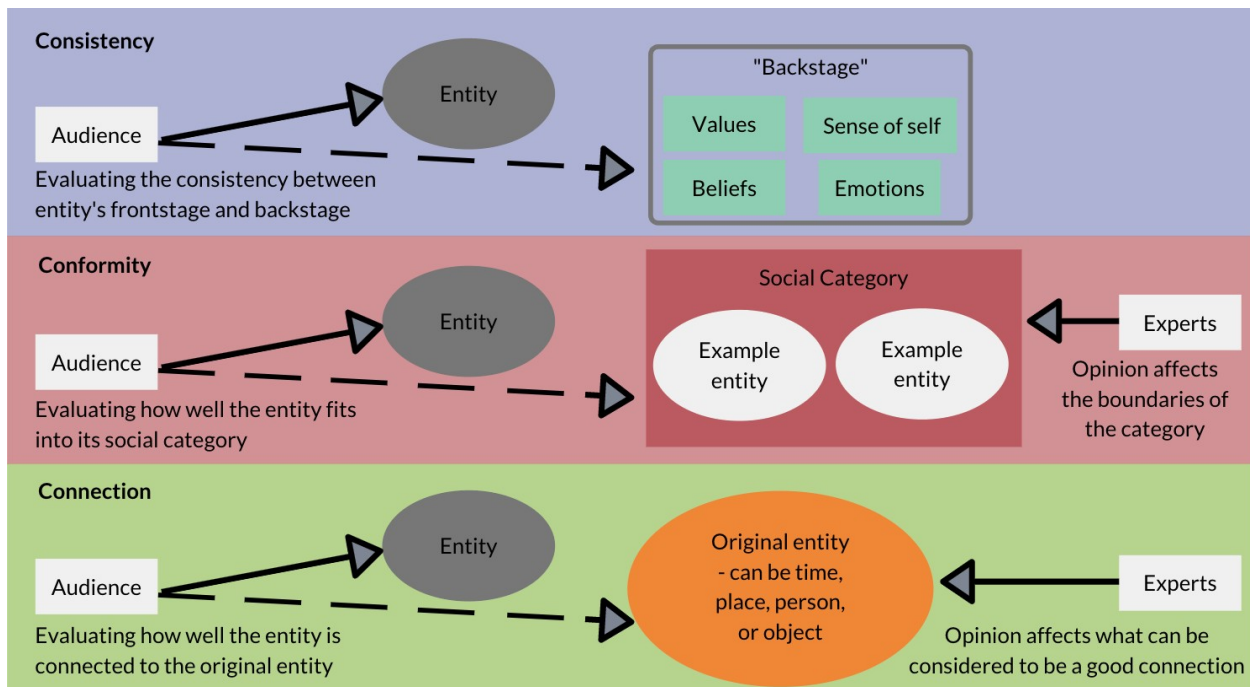


Figure 2: Authenticity as consistency, conformity and connection.

3.3.1 Consistency

Authenticity as consistency is seen as a relationship between internal values and external expressions of an entity (Lehman et al., 2019). Goffman (1959) was the first to introduce the idea of “front” and “back” stage, where the frontstage represents the external expressions and the back stage represents the internal values, or the “true self”. Gino et al. (2015) include also the emotions and sense of self in the meaning of backstage. An entity is then seen as authentic by the audience when it acts in accordance with its own values, emotions, and sense of self (Gino et al., 2015). Gino et al. (2015) argue that authenticity is directly linked to morality, and people experiencing inauthenticity lead them to feel more immoral and impure.

As seen in figure 2, when considering authenticity as consistency, the audience evaluates the entity's authenticity based on values, beliefs, emotions, and sense of self as the referent. The entity acts as the frontstage which the audience sees and the referent of values, beliefs, emotions, and sense of self act as the "invisible" backstage to which the audience compares the frontstage.

Scholars and audiences seem to personify organizations (Skilton & Purdy, 2017) and brands (Thompson et al., 2006) as if they were individuals with true self. Skilton & Purdy (2017) introduce a term "observed identity" to see how observers evaluate organizations based on how well they "walk the talk and live up to their claims" (Skilton & Purdy, 2017). According to Lehman et al. (2019), most studies conducted on authenticity are cross-sectional, and, thus do not explore whether the identity of an entity changes over time. They argue that the temporal nature of such identities should be considered, when authenticity as consistency is studied.

3.3.2 Conformity

Authenticity as conformity is seen as a relationship between an entity and the norms of its social category (Lehman et al., 2019). A social category is defined as a collection of people that have certain characteristics or traits in common, but they tend not to interact with each other on a regular basis. Thus, categories in this context are different type of entities that are classified together from sharing similarities in their form, content, or social relations (White 2019). An entity is then seen as authentic if it acts according to the norms of its category.

Audience determines the boundaries of the social category (Lehman et al., 2019) and membership in it (Hsu et al., 2009). In determining the boundaries of a category, critics, regulators, and professional associations have an active role - the process is often democratic and negotiated (Lehman et al., 2019).

As seen in figure 2, audiences make the judgment of authenticity based on the norms of the social category as the referent. The entity then either fits or does not fit into those norms and thus receives the evaluation of authenticity. The boundaries of the category are influenced strongly by critics, regulators, and professional associations.

Many scholars assume that the criteria for a category remains stable over time (Lehman et al., 2019). However, some scholars question this, for example Lu & Fine (1995) suggest that the boundaries for categories are in continuous flux and thus entities should work to situate themselves in those categories, even aim to redefine the boundaries for it. Hsu et al. (2009) even say that entities can explore and learn about the preferences of the audience for each category and adapt their offering accordingly in order to develop authenticity.

3.3.3 Connection

Authenticity as connection is seen as a relationship between an entity and a person, place, or time which the entity attempts to capture, portray, or describe (Lehman et al., 2019). Gelman

(2003) elaborates this by saying that entities can contain an “essence” or a quality that links to the person, place, or time which audiences see as an authentic cue. An entity is then seen as authentic to the extent that it is able to reproduce a “symbolized and remembered” past (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013) or a person (Bruner, 1994).

In authenticity as connection, there is more reliance on expert knowledge and judgment (Lehman et al., 2019). For example, the provenance of artwork is determined by professionals. Newman et al. (2011) provide another example of how a clothing worn by a famous person can have authentic value for fans by having a connection to the celebrity. An item may also symbolize connection to particular place or time (Dutton, 2003), for example a vintage car can be seen as authentic if it possesses the qualities of the original car, even if most of its parts were actually new (Leigh et al., 2006).

As seen in figure 2, audience finds authenticity in an entity based on how well it is able to reproduce the referent - a person, a place, an object, or a time. Experts most often evaluate the magnitude of the link between the entity and the referent, thus having strong influence on the evaluation of authenticity.

With organizations, authenticity as connection materializes for example in how well the processes that harken back to the organization’s own past are “credible” or “believable” reproductions of the original (Beverland et al., 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2017).

4 Value of authenticity for a brand

Beverland et al. (2008) argue that meaning of authenticity in brand-related advertising has changed. Whereas it was originally used to reassure consumers of the genuine article, recent meanings of the concept go beyond such claims. Brand authenticity in modern world aims to impregnate the product with a set of values that differentiate it from other, more commercialized brands (Beverland et al. 2008).

It has been shown in many studies that brand authenticity tends to engender positive responses in consumers such as brand identification and attachment (Baker et al., 2014), higher ratings (Frake, 2017; Kovacs et al., 2014), greater willingness to pay (O'Connor et al., 2017), product adoption (Fueller et al., 2013), and sales (Beverland, 2005a).

4.1 Risks in trying to create value with authenticity

Although audiences make the judgments about authenticity, entities can engage in activities that may improve the evaluation of authenticity. One example is impression management, a concept that was already introduced by Goffman (1959). In it an entity has an intention to manage the impressions formed by audiences through the entity's own expressions towards the audience_(Lehman et al., 2019). However, Kovacs et al. (2017) argue that praising one's own authenticity has a risk of backfiring, making one come off as anything but authentic. Lehman et al. (2018) elaborate further that self-promotional claims of authenticity are usually seen as

inauthentic by the audience, yet they can in certain situations, with the right narrative, actually be appreciated by the audience.

There is a dual problem of obvious commercial motives and at the same time positioning brands as “authentic,” emphasizing the timeless values desired by consumers (Beverland, 2005b). Beverland (2005b) suggests that brand managers should open up their brands to members of a community and downplay their overt marketing prowess. Rather, they should appeal to the timeless values of that community (Beverland, 2005b). Lehman et al. (2018) suggest that the audience reaction may vary according to the type of authenticity the company claims. Moral authenticity may be judged more favorably, whereas claims conveying category authenticity will be judged less (Lehman et al. 2018).

Holt (2002) describes the management of brand authenticity in the following way: “To be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value.” According to Lehman et al. (2019), audiences demand that organizations and their brands be consistent not only in terms of their values and actions but also over time.

One topic related to authenticity of organizations, is emotional labor - the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for organizational goals (Grandey, 2000). If the organization succeeds in infiltrating feelings of authenticity, some positive outcomes are associated with it,

such as improved work engagement, employee satisfaction, and employee turnover (Cable et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2017). However, should this lead to the employees needing to show inauthentic feelings or expressions, many studies have shown that this can have a negative impact on customers' satisfaction (Grandey et al., 2005). Even customer loyalty can suffer when customers sense inauthenticity from a company's employees (Wang et al. 2017).

4.2 Proven means to create value with authenticity

Several studies have shown how audiences, and consumers in particular, make authenticity attributions on the basis of emotional branding tactics (Thompson et al., 2006) such as storytelling (Chiu et al., 2012; Beverland, 2005a). When interviewing winemakers Beverland (2005a) found that creating an impression of authenticity required them to create a sincere story connected to the production.

Audiences have also been shown to make authenticity attributions on the basis of product names (Verhaal et al., 2015), production process (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Voronov et al., 2013; Weber et al., 2008), how the products are advertised (Moeran, 2005), the extent to which it is "local" (Cutcher, 2014), and ownership structure (Frake, 2017; Kovacs et al., 2014). In addition, audiences have been shown to evaluate the authenticity of an organization on the specific basis of its corporate social responsibility programs (Beckman et al., 2009; Skilton & Purdy, 2017) and the manner in which such programs are publicized or not (Carlos & Lewis, 2017).

Even CEO portraits have impact on authenticity (Guthey & Jackson, 2005). Authentic leadership has shown to have a role in enhancing ethical climate (Zhu et al., 2011) of an organization and commitment of the employees (Rego et al. 2013), which may also lead to the employees communicating more authentically to customers. However, it has been criticized that it is challenging to distinguish authentic leadership from other forms of positive leaderships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

4.3 Managing authenticity from the perspectives of consistency, conformity and connection

Some identified factors that support the feeling, for the audience, that an entity is acting in accordance with their true self (authenticity as consistency) are, for example, positive mood (Lenton et al., 2013), nostalgia (Baldwin et al., 2015), power (Chen et al., 2009), and attachment security (Gillath et al., 2010). Heppner et al. (2008) found that experiencing one's true self is integral to daily self-esteem, as felt authenticity is uniquely related to self-esteem. Since brands are often seen as having a personality or identity (Thompson et al., 2006), all of the above-mentioned factors may have implications for the authenticity of a brand as well.

In the case of authenticity as conformity, it is argued that authenticity can be "manufactured" (Jones et al., 2005). As Lu & Fine (1995) explain, the boundaries for categories are in continuous flux and thus entities can work to situate themselves in those categories and even redefine the

boundaries for it. However, membership in multiple categories generally reduces audience engagement (Hsu et al., 2009) and perceptions of authenticity (Kovacs et al., 2014).

In the case of authenticity as connection, research suggests that an entity can “become” authentic via a connection, even if the connection arises long after its creation. (Lehman et al. 2019)

4.4 Summary of theoretical findings

A common definition given for the purpose of branding is to reflect the complete experience that customers have with products (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). From this meaning it can already be seen that when consumers are motivated by authentic cues in the objects they purchase (Beverland & Farrelly 2010), it makes sense for a brand to become more authentic in the eyes of its target customers.

Authenticity has been studied from many different perspectives and by several disciplines such as psychology, social sciences, management and organizational studies and consumer Research. Whereas it has one widely accepted meaning as something that is either genuine, or real, or true (Lehman et al., 2019), scholars from different backgrounds, treat that meaning differently in their contexts.

Key underlying factors to deeper meaning of authenticity are that it is goal and context dependent (Leigh et al., 2006); it is not a feature of the entity itself, but rather a claim that is accepted by an audience (Peterson, 2005); and it also depends on the referent to which the audience compares the entity (Lehman et al., 2019).

Scholars divide the deeper meaning of authenticity into three categories: authenticity as consistency, authenticity as conformity, and authenticity as connection - the differentiating factor in these three is that the referent to which audiences compare the entity, differs. In consistency, the referent is the values, beliefs, emotions, and sense of self of the entity. In conformity, the referent is the social category (or categories) to which the entity belongs to. In connection, the referent is the person, place, object, or time which the entity aims to represent/have a link to. (Lehman et al., 2019)

Brand authenticity has been studied mostly (though not exclusively) on the context of consistency - brands are often seen to have a “personality” (Thompson et al., 2006) that might be considered “sincere” or even “rugged” (Sundar & Noseworthy, 2016). Lehman et al. (2019) explain that audiences demand brands and organizations to be consistent with their values and actions.

However, less is known how brand managers in busy business life deal with brand authenticity and what kind of meanings they give for it.

5 Methodology

In this chapter I explain how the study was conducted. I introduce and provide justification for the research design, data collection and methods used in data analysis. I also reflect on the reliability and validity of the methods.

5.1 Research Design and Process

This research relies on qualitative methods to explore how the brand managers experience authenticity of a brand and how they manage it.

A semi-structured interview was chosen to allow and encourage unexpected findings, and a set of open-ended interview questions (Appendix 1) was used to guide the flow of interviews.

Open-ended questions allowed the participants to answer freely according to their thinking (Ghuri & Gronhaug, 2010). Additional questions were used to encourage elaboration and clarification of the themes as they arose.

The questions were divided into three parts: (1) Introduction, of which focus was to get the interviewee to first talk about something familiar - themselves, their work history and their company, in an attempt to get them to open up for the more relevant questions, (2) Branding in general, which focuses on the interviewee's opinion on what matters most to branding and how brand value creates business value, (3) Role of authenticity in branding, which focused on

how the interviewee sees the meaning and value of authenticity for a brand, and how should it be managed.

The participants were chosen as a convenient sample. The author of the study worked, at the time of this research, in the company Ambronite. Ambronite's founders had connections to many other consumer goods startups with high focus on branding and that network was used to reach out to the interviewees. Also the author's own network was used to locate a few interviewees.

In total, 11 people from 10 companies were approached via email, phone, and LinkedIn, of which eight people agreed to an interview on the short timeframe. Of the eight people working in seven different companies, six were startup founders / C-level employees and two were senior employees in a creative agency company, of which one was the founder of the agency. Table 1 describes the participants' background characteristics.

Participant number	Gender	Age group	Startup or Agency	Role in the company
1	M	30-35	Startup	Chief Executive Officer
2	M	25-30	Startup	Founder
3	M	35-40	Agency	Employee
4	M	45-50	Startup	Founder
5	M	25-30	Startup	Chief Strategy Officer
6	M	40-45	Agency	Founder
7	M	30-35	Startup	Founder
8	M	35-40	Startup	Founder

Table 1: Characteristics of study participants

The audiotaped interviews were conducted during the Autumn 2018 and Winter 2019 (demographics of the participants are displayed in Appendix 2). Silverman (2011) argues that since the purpose of qualitative research is to gain understanding of the participants' experiences, 'authenticity' is generally more important than sampling size. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. Seven were held in Finnish and One in English. Generally, it was agreed beforehand that the interviews would take around 30-45 minutes, and in the end they mostly did, with a few exceptions on both ends.

With all participants, verbal agreement to record the interview was made on the promise that the interviews would be treated anonymously and only be used for research purposes.

5.2 Data analysis

After conducting all interviews, the interview data was transcribed verbatim. The transcribed texts included 91 pages (Calibri, fontsize 12, spacing 2). The text was first read several times to get acquainted with it and to find what kind of themes arouse. For a thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001), relevant statements were first identified and highlighted from the interviews. The statements were then systematically reviewed and compared with the rest of the text in order to find similarities and differences between the interviews (constant comparison), and these were coded. These codes were then grouped into *basic themes*, which were further categorized into *organizing themes*, and finally to broader *global themes* encompassing both basic themes and organizing themes. Tabulations were used to determine frequencies of all levels of themes.

5.3 Context of the study

This study focuses on the point of view of management of brand authenticity. Not only that but six of the eight interviewees are founders / C-level employees of startups, so this study is about managing brand authenticity in a startup context. It is also worth noting that all six startups are heavily focused on making a positive impact to the world. Four of the startups work for solving global problems while the remaining two focus on improving people's daily lives.

5.4 Reliability and validity

Concepts reliability and validity have been traditionally used in quantitative research but their focus is somewhat different in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Whereas quantitative researcher usually tests predetermined hypothesis and attempts to summarize phenomena into measurable categories that can be applied to other similar situations, qualitative scholar collects information that seeks to describe a topic thoroughly more than to measure it. Qualitative research may create new hypotheses that needs to be tested in larger samples. (Bryman, 2006)

Reliability of a study refers to what extent the findings are repeatable. Reliability can be divided into external reliability (degree to which a study can be replicated) and internal reliability (when there is more than one observer, how the observers agree with one another). (Bryman & Bell, 2007) As I am the only observer in this study, internal reliability cannot be tested and intercoder consistency cannot be measured. However, my interpretations of the findings are revealed and supported by the quotes of interviewees, and, thus their credibility is exposed to readers. External reliability is challenging for qualitative studies as contexts and social settings differ from one another (Bryman and Bell 2007). This is also true to my study.

Validity refers to the extent to which a concept corresponds to the real world. It can also be divided to internal validity (consistency between research observations and the theoretical ideas it creates) and external validity (the degree to which findings are generalizable). (Bryman and Bell 2007). In my study the sample is small and the context derives from brand managers

heavily focusing on having positive impact on the world: sustainability, fairness and improving people's lives. Thus, the findings may not apply to other contexts. (Bryman & Bell 2007)

6 Results

This chapter presents the main findings of the interviews. The eight interviews provided rich material and valuable insights how brand managers understand brand authenticity and what methods they use to craft authenticity into brands.

Thematic network analysis (Figure 5) provides a “web-like network as an organizing principle and a representational means, and it makes explicit the procedures that may be employed in going from text to interpretation” (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This chapter is divided according to the Global themes and Organizing themes. Basic themes are also bolded in the text to clarify findings.

The interviewees elaborated brand and its authenticity from many perspectives: from the point of view of consumers (“Motives and experiences of the audience”), brand image (“External inducements of the brand”), and operations (“Internal operations behind the brand”). The first section looks at the findings around Motives and experiences of the audience, the second section explores the External inducements of the brand and the third Internal operations of the brand. Figure 3 shows a detailed table of the themes.

Basic themes	Organizing themes	Global themes
Possibility to identify	Factors that affect the evaluation	Motives and experiences of the audience
Trust		
Ability to influence the brand		
Value for the audience		
Awareness (Possibility to identify)	Requirements to make the evaluation	
Brand name	Things that audience perceives	External inducements of the brand
Visual look		
Brand personality		
Brand's actions consistent with brand claims	Consistency	
Employees' actions consistent with brand claims		
Brand partnerships consistent with brand claims		
Story	Communication styles that enhance authenticity	
Expertise		
Emotionality		
Understandability		
Transparency, Openness, Honesty		
Superimposing authentic image	Communication styles that hinder authenticity	
Attempting to hide mistakes		
Company values	Fundamentals for building authenticity	Internal operations behind the brand
Significance to the people behind the brand		
Responsibility		
Measurability	Strategic planning	
Realistic vision		
Brand invented before products		
Patience, perseverance		
Adjusting brand over time		
Different meaning for different people		

Figure 3: Visualization of the inductive categorization

6.1 Motives and experiences of the audience

Ultimately the audience evaluates whether a brand is authentic or not. For the audience to make a positive evaluation of authenticity, a few factors and requirements rise above others.

Totally, two different categories were found in the interviews regarding audience: things that

affect the authenticity evaluation and requirements to make the evaluation. These categories form the basis of outcomes toward which brands should aim for when building authenticity.

6.1.1 Factors that affect the evaluation

First category regarding the audience is about what the audience needs to experience in order to make a favorable authenticity evaluation of a brand. The interviewees emphasized 4 factors: **Possibility to identify, trust, ability to influence the brand**, and giving **value for the audience**.

The interviewees underlined the importance of how the brand makes the audience feel. Both possibility to identify and trust were seen as feelings that enhance the authenticity of a brand in the eyes of its audience. Whereas possibility to identify was seen as stemming from showing the people behind the brand, trust was seen as coming from how the claims of the brand show in its actions.

“We are the only brand [in our market segment] that is actually approachable to both consumers and entrepreneurs.” - Interviewee 5

“When the end users use it [product], and it works, and they give positive feedback, that is what builds the trust.” - Interviewee 1

The ability to influence the brand was seen as something that the audience begins to desire when the brand becomes well established. When the audience gets enough attached to the brand, they want to influence how the brand grows further. One interviewee elaborated that this can become a challenge since at this point the audience often does not want to see the brand change in any way, yet the business might require it.

“When brand starts to receive wide awareness, people begin to want to influence it... that's when managing the brand becomes harder.” - Interviewee 6

Value for the audience was underlined by all but one interviewee. It was emphasized that a brand should not just communicate what the audience wants to hear but actually deliver real value to them. This way the company shows how it understands the needs of the audience.

“You always have a plan, but it always changes depending on how customer reacts to your message” - Interviewee 2

“You must keep you current customers pleased and grow loyalty.” - Interviewee 3

6.1.2 Requirements to make the evaluation

Awareness was seen as maybe the most significant factor for the audience to make an authenticity evaluation. While the other factors can either hinder or enhance the authentic

feeling the audience gets, the interviewees underlined that awareness is a must. If the audience is not aware of the brand, the brand does not exist and, thus, cannot even be evaluated as authentic. Thus, awareness is not really something that should be considered when trying to make a brand more (or less) authentic, but instead it should be handled before putting focus into factors that can hinder or enhance authenticity.

“Without awareness, brand cannot exist... If I ask someone if they know this certain brand, and they say that they don’t, the brand doesn’t exist for that person.” -

Interviewee 6

6.2 External inducements of the brand

For the audience to evaluate a brand’s authenticity, it looks for certain cues in the brand. These cues are both directly perceivable to the audience and can also be seen as how the brand acts and communicates. Four categories were identified in the interviews: Things that audience sees, Consistency, Communication styles that enhance authenticity, and Communication styles that hinder authenticity. These categories form the factors that a brand can and should directly manage in order to craft an authentic image to the audience and enhance it.

6.2.1 Things that audience perceives

Directly visible cues make the base on which audience builds the evaluation of authenticity. The interviewees included topics such as **brand name**, **visual look** and **brand personality** in this category. Whereas these three topics were not seen as something that really enhances the authenticity of a brand, the interviewees emphasized that these are often the only thing the audience perceives.

The interviewees highlighted brand name because of it being the factor that the audience will see and hear most often. The brand name itself should create mental images for the viewer and be able to remind about the relevance of the brand to them.

“The name of our company is inspiring and in line with what we actually do.”

- Interviewee 7

“The name is important - our company’s old name was not something that could be branded, so we changed it.” - Interviewee 5

Visual look is often about catching the attention of the viewer and getting them interested in the brand and its products. The interviewees talked about the importance of visual look to both standing out from the competition and being able to raise the right feelings in the audience. While it was not directly mentioned to enhance authenticity, a few interviewees talked about

how it is crucial that visual look is also aligned with the message the brand wants to communicate - people should be able to recognize the brand just from its overall looks.

“The first thing to raise interest is our overall looks. It's beautiful, it looks like a gift.” -

Interviewee 8

“Your product can be good and your formula can be different... but then the prime is like what people recognize.” - Interviewee 2

Brand personality was seen as crucial factor for building authenticity, especially in creating the feelings in the audience that can enhance authenticity. The interviewees emphasized that the brand should communicate as if there was a real person behind it. Audience should be able to sense the people behind the brand from the brand's communications.

“Authenticity is about the brand having a human face.” - interviewee 7

“Like real young people are behind this brand, not like some cover, like marketing agency.” - Interviewee 2

6.2.2 Consistency

Consistency was seen by many interviewees as the very definition of authenticity - the brand has to 'walk the talk'. Three different topics arose in the interviewees for consistency:

consistency of the brand's actions, consistency of employees and consistency of partnerships.

The interviewees underlined that all these three should be consistent with the brand's values and core in order to the brand to be seen as authentic.

Brand's actions being consistent with the brand's claims was emphasized the most by the interviewees. It was seen as the factor that is most evaluated by the audience - does the brand's actions tell the same message as the brand's claims?

"Authenticity derives through the brand's actions" - interviewee 4

"Brand needs to convey a feeling that it stays consistent with its values."

- Interviewee 7

The consistency between employees' actions and the brand's claims was another factor that was seen to influence the authentic image of a brand. Although the consistency of brand's actions was emphasized a lot more, the consistency of employees was seen as a large factor especially when the company grows - all employees should communicate the same message when representing the brand and managing this becomes harder when more and more people join the company.

"Employees must breathe and live at the same space [as the brand] so that it shows outside... and strenghtens it [authenticity of the brand]." - Interviewee 5

“It [authenticity] requires a lot of discussions [between the team] so that there is a coherent ambition and it is known that this is the "soul" or "DNA", and what are the values and mission.” - Interviewee 8

Consistency of brand partnerships was also briefly mentioned in some of the interviews. Partnerships were seen to carry a risk for hindering authenticity - the brand should be very thoughtful about whom they decide to partner with. Those partners might not share the same values and beliefs as the brand and that might come off as inauthentic for the audience and customers.

“It is important where the brand is seen and with whom collaboration is made.”

- Interviewee 5

6.2.3 Communication styles that enhance authenticity

Communication styles were also considered to have effect on how the audience evaluates the brand's authenticity. Total of five communication styles were discussed by the interviewees to enhance authenticity of a brand: **story, expertise, emotionality, understandability** and **transparency, openness and honesty**.

Story was one of the most discussed topics in the interviews and was seen as a crucial factor in communicating authenticity. Story was seen as both a factor that enhances authenticity and

also something that makes the marketing of the brand seem less like an attempt to seduce the consumer into something that they might regret later.

“We are trying to build a story around what we sell, so we don't only sell a product but also that story.” - Interviewee 1

“One must build a story that is worth telling and which resonates with the consumers.” - Interviewee 6

Expertise was briefly discussed in the interviews - it was seen as a beneficial factor in building trust with the audience and hence indirectly leading to more favorable authenticity evaluation.

“One thing is, of course, expertise that should be built.” - Interviewee 1

Emotionality was also briefly mentioned as a factor that enhances the communication to reach the audience - it helps in communicating the brand personality as well as in raising the right feelings in the audience to them to evaluate the brand as authentic.

“Brand should have an emotional edge to it, that helps it to stand out from the noise.” - Interviewee 4

Understandability was discussed also as a means to reach better the target audience. It was seen more as a factor that does not as much enhance authenticity as it may hinder authenticity when there is a lack of it. Yet, according to a few interviewees, understandability is nowadays something that often is forgotten, when wanting to communicate several things simultaneously.

“But then we have like a quota for branding... we usually choose like three or less selling points. So that [amount] is like a digestible information for customer to understand” -

Interviewee 2

Transparency, openness and honesty were discussed, although with three different terms, in the same way, in how they can enhance authenticity. Not being honest, open, or transparent was seen as risking consistency and thus harming authenticity. It was also mentioned that when a brand can communicate transparently, openly and/or honestly, it does not need to use as much traditional sales tactics.

“Brand needs to be transparent and open about where its product has been made and how.” - Interviewee 4

“When a mistake is made, one should stay honest and apologize.”

- Interviewee 3

6.2.4 Communication styles that hinder authenticity

Two topics came up in the interviews as communication styles that can hinder the authenticity evaluation: **superimposing authentic image** and **attempting to hide mistakes**.

Superimposing authentic image for a brand was discussed to have very high risk of harming authenticity. It was emphasized that a brand should not just make claims according to what it thinks will catch the audience's attention. Building authenticity without having anything concrete behind the claims will eventually backfire.

"When you market your brand, you can't do it by superimposing - you have to let people get it themselves." - Interviewee 7

"Mistake is made when trying to craft just something interesting, when thinking of not being interesting enough by default." - Interviewee 6

Attempting to hide mistakes was also seen as a thing that always ends up hindering authenticity in the eyes of the audience. The interviewees discussed that when a company/brand tries to hide its mistakes, it will eventually come out to the audience and then it will seriously harm the consistency and thus authenticity.

"You should always aim to adapt better and admit your mistakes." - Interviewee 1

“During crises the biggest threat is how you react. To stay authentic, you should be honest and apologize” - Interviewee 3

6.3 Internal operations behind the brand

Evaluation of authenticity is always context dependent. The context in branding is often the values that the brand mirrors in its communications and actions, but also how the people behind the brand communicate the significance of the brand to themselves, as well as the responsibility of the brand. These three form the first category of the Internal operations behind the brand: Fundamentals for building authenticity. The second category, Strategic planning, is about what strategic actions should be taken, and when, as well as what strategic tools could be used, in order to build and maintain brand authenticity.

6.3.1 Fundamentals for building authenticity

As mentioned above, **values**, **significance to self** and **responsibility** were seen as fundamentals for a brand to be able to be seen as authentic. These were viewed as a “backstage” of a brand - the thing that audience cannot directly see but assumes to be there and to what they base the evaluation of authenticity from what they do see.

Values were emphasized as forming a basis for building authenticity. Values were seen as something that justify the existence of the brand and that should guide everything the brand

does. It was also noted that in best case scenario the set of values is so concrete that the audience will not find faults in it, no matter the perspective.

“It is important to think what are the values that you will stay faithful to.”

- Interviewee 1

“It is important what kind of values you are communicating... You have to bring meaning and concreteness to cynical people.” - Interviewee 4

Significance to self was also considered important. It was discussed that when the brand stands for something that has significance to the people behind it, it is easier to keep motivation higher, and the people will talk more openly and enthusiastically about the brand. Also, when there is strong belief to the products of the brand, it is easier to sell them.

“I’ve been a sneaker head for many years and I wanted to create something that is like really sustainable.” - Interviewee 2

“Primarily I want to create a product that I personally believe in.” - Interviewee 8

Responsibility was more briefly discussed in the interviews and did not come out directly as much as the other two fundamentals. Yet, indirectly, responsibility was seen as a heavy factor for all of the six interviewed startup founders - four of the startups are heavily focused in

making a positive impact to the world and the remaining two are in improving people's daily lives.

"A company must be responsible as in that they know what they are doing and what effect it has." - Interviewee 3

6.3.2 Strategic planning

Strategic planning was not discussed as a direct means for enhancing authenticity but as something that helps to better build and manage it. Total of six topics were discussed in the interviews under strategic planning: **measurability, realistic vision, inventing brand before products, patience and perseverance, adjusting brand over time and authenticity meaning different things for different people.**

Under the topic measurability, the interviewees discussed both the measurability of the brand's claimed mission as well as the measurability of the authenticity itself. While authenticity was not seen as something that can be directly measured with numbers, it was emphasized that there should be a measurable goal, be it an awareness goal or even a sales goal. Regarding measuring the brand's mission, it was discussed to better communicate the consistency of the brand's actions to the audience.

“It [the brand claims] should be measurable - for example how much has a brand been able to change things toward what its goal is.” - Interviewee 4

“We should’ve had better measuring tools right from the beginning. It would’ve surely let us get much more out of our efforts.” - Interviewee 8

Realistic vision was considered important in the interviews from several perspectives. Some mistakes that happen when there is a lack of realistic vision were mentioned such as: 1) hopping onto every trend without considering if they are aligned with the brand’s values and mission, 2) making claims that the brand’s actions do not back up, 3) aiming too high too soon and 4) being unable to deliver what is promised. All these could be fixed with a good vision.

“You shouldn’t sell what you can’t deliver - always consider what you realistically can offer.” - Interviewee 1

“Building brand solely on discounts is very short sighted and should not be done.” - Interviewee 5

A few interviewees considered it important that before starting product development, the founders should have a very clear answer to why they are doing what they do. One interviewee even said that it has been an advantage that they were able to come up with the foundation for their brand before building any products.

“For us, it made things much easier to come up with the brand before making any products.” - Interviewee 4

“Many businesses run with great visual look, but if they don't have a good foundation for branding, it will come out sooner or later.” - Interviewee 6

Patience and perseverance were mentioned as important features for building brand and authenticity. Too often brand managers lack patience and end up giving up on activities that could build authenticity in the long run - and instead switch between different tactics of which none can enhance neither authenticity nor brand value in short term.

“A common mistake in building a brand is the lack of patience and perseverance.” - Interviewee 3

Adjusting brand over time was seen important for several reasons: new challenges might arise that question the relevance or importance of the brand's mission and/or values, the most common trends that are linked to the brand's mission and values can become outdated and uninteresting, even the brand's mission can become “completed” in the sense that buying from it serves no other purpose any longer than just fulfilling some customer need - and this can make the brand less compelling.

“Branding requires certain dynamicity - when the world changes constantly the brand can't be completely constant either.” - Interviewee 8

Different meaning for different people came up also in the interviews as an important topic regarding strategic planning. The interviewees emphasized that no brand can please everyone - thus it is crucial to know who the target customer group is and aim the brand management toward getting favorable authenticity evaluation from that group.

“Authenticity means different things for different people. A brand should have the courage to tell its story without trying to please everyone.” - Interviewee 7

7 Discussion

In this chapter, I will summarize and discuss the findings of the interviews regarding the first research question and compare them with the existing literature, resulting in the development of a theoretical model. This model gives concrete tips for startups to enhance their brand authenticity in the eyes of their target audience. Based on this emergent model I will answer the second research question: *How can a startup best leverage authenticity in building its brand?*

7.1 A model to leverage authenticity for branding

My study and literature review provide an understanding about the importance of authenticity in building a brand for a startup company. My aim was to identify the means for a startup to build an authentic brand. Authenticity of a brand can be seen from three perspectives: what factors affect the most the audience's authenticity evaluation, what kind of external inducements does the audience perceive in a brand, and what kind of internal operations should be considered in order to enhance authenticity. The model of managing authenticity, which I will propose, is based on these three perspectives.

As discussed in the literature review, authenticity is socially constructed and always depends on relevant others who either accept or reject the claim of authenticity (Peterson 2005). Firstly, as

discovered in the interviews, it must be emphasized that a brand does not exist if its target audience is not aware of it. Thus, enhancing brand visibility (such as brand name and visual look) and awakening the target audience's awareness of the brand is a requirement that should always be considered when aiming to leverage authenticity.

Once the target audience is aware of the brand, important aspects for enhancing authenticity are: 1) building trust with the audience, 2) the audience's identification with the brand, 3) providing value for the audience and 4) allowing the audience to influence the brand. The importance of trustworthiness of a brand has been noted in previous studies as something that the audience seeks (Fueller et al., 2013). The importance of identification with the brand has also been noticed by previous studies on brand authenticity. It has been suggested that consumers prefer brands which reinforce their desired identity (Arnould and Price, 2000). Brand should also provide value for its customers which, to my knowledge, has not been mentioned in previous literature on authenticity. However, nearly all interviewees emphasized that brand should not only communicate what customers want to hear but also deliver real value and show its audience that it understands the needs of them. My interviewees posed that customers want to influence the brand and this is a challenge to the company since as a consequence the brand needs to change over time. This is partly contrary to the previous literature which has argued both that audience demands that brands should stay consistent over time but also that the authenticity evaluations by the audience might change depending on the context (Lehman et al. 2019). These four aspects of audience experiences serve as the target of branding efforts in my proposed model.

The tools for reaching the target (the four aspects of audience experiences) are twofold. The first tool is how the brand manages its external inducements. The second tool is the internal operations of the brand.

The external inducements of the brand are the ones that the audience can perceive, directly or indirectly. Most quoted inducement in the interviews was consistency between a brand's internal values and everything an audience can perceive of it (products, communications, employees' actions and brand partnerships). Consistency is also an important theme in the existing literature on brand authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019).

For the audience to perceive the brand to be consistent, its products and communications as well as its employees' actions and its partnerships should be aligned with the company's internal values. Frake (2017) as well as Skilton and Purdy (2017) emphasize honesty and sincerity of the brand for the customer in achieving consistency - is the brand "true to itself". It has also been noted in previous literature that emotional labor and employees' actions should be consistent with the brand claims (Grandey et al. 2005, Sirianni et al., 2013, Wang et al. 2017). Furthermore, interviewees strongly emphasized that even the brand's partners' actions should be in line with brand claims. To my knowledge, this has not been largely explored in authenticity research.

Several means in communication can enhance brand authenticity, for example emotionality, story, brand personality and honesty/transparency. Existing literature supports these findings - Thompson et al. (2006) talk about the importance of emotionality and brand personality to enhance authenticity, Beverland (2005a) shows that having a story for the brand can enhance authenticity, and Frake (2017) discuss how honesty influences the audience's evaluation. The interviewees also emphasized that showing expertise, and brand being understandable can enhance its authenticity.

On the other hand, the interviewees had discovered that superimposing brand image or trying to hide mistakes may be serious risks for the brand authenticity which has also been noted in previous research. Surface acting or "facades of conformity" has been presented as false representations created by employees to appear as if they embrace organizational values which leads to evaluation of inauthenticity by audience (Hewlin, 2003).

Company may enhance or hinder its brand authenticity in several ways with its internal operations. Values and their significance to people behind the brand were seen as the most important fundamentals in the interviews. In strategic planning it was argued that it would be good if the brand was built before the products and that the effect of authenticity should be measured somehow. Realistic vision with patience and perseverance were also discussed as important factors, since without them, it is too easy to just head to every direction without considering what works for the target audience and what can realistically be achieved.

Authenticity having different meanings for different people was also discussed to be an important knowledge, since trying to please everyone will almost always end up in failure. Beverland and Farrelly's work (2010) as well as Grayson and Martinec's work (2004) support this finding. Lehman et al. (2019) also argue that the authenticity evaluations by an audience may change over time, which supports the finding from the interviews that brand should be adjusted over time to remain authentic for the target audience.

In figure 4, I show the proposed model with concrete internal operation - external inducement connections that may lead to certain favorable factors that affects the audience's authenticity evaluations. In other words: 1) what internal operations should the company focus on in building its brand and 2) how should they communicate those operations outside in order to 3) get the best possible authenticity evaluation from the target audience.

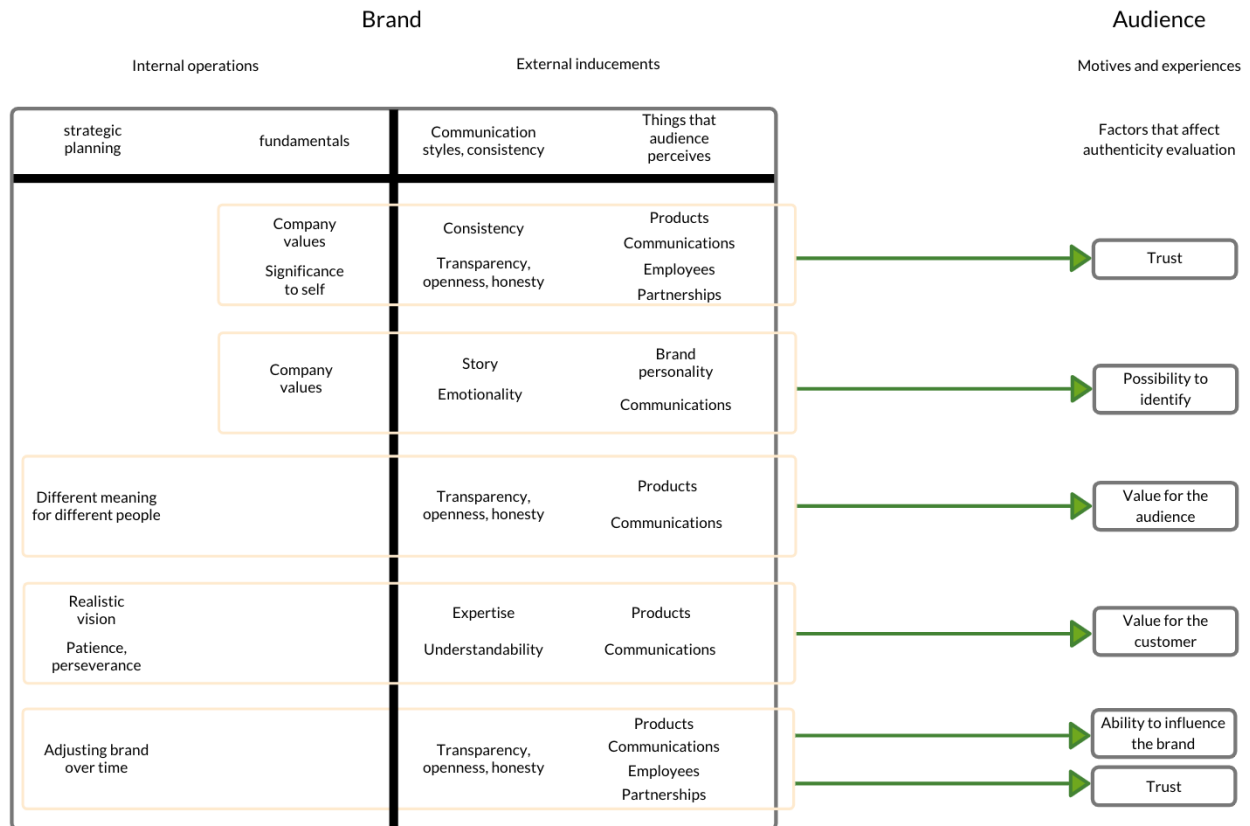


Figure 4: Brand authenticity management model with concrete recommendations combined from the literature review and the interviews.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on my findings and their implications, I have divided my recommendations for brand managers to two categories: 1) how to enhance brand authenticity in the eyes of the target audience, and 2) how to avoid pitfalls of inauthenticity.

My recommendations build on the goal of reaching the target audience with a message that awakens the desired outcomes in the audience: 1) build trust with the audience, 2) give the

audience possibility to identify with the brand, 3) provide value for the audience or 4) let the audience influence the brand.

7.2.1 How to enhance brand authenticity

My first recommendation to enhancing brand authenticity is the most significant both in the amount of existing literature behind it and how many times it was mentioned in the interviews: consistency. The aim here is to build trust with the target audience. The company behind the brand needs to have concrete values that guides every action of the brand, and to amplify their power, they should also be something that every employee of the company can stand for. Then the company should transparently communicate those to the audience and be sure that the company's products, employees and partnerships tell the same story. For example, if a core value of a company was sustainability, its products should by definition be sustainable, the employees should be excited about the products and live by the value (at least when they can be seen representing the brand), and the partnerships that the brand establishes should also be in line with sustainability (for example, not to partner up with a brand that does more harm to environment than it can make up for).

Second recommendation build upon how in existing literature it is said that consumers purposefully link objects and experiences to the stories of the self and prefer brands and experiences that reinforce their desired identity (Arnould and Price, 2000). The aim of is to help the audience to better identify with the brand. The company behind the brand needs to again

have concrete values decided which guide all its actions. Then it needs to communicate them to the audience in a way that the audience can easily identify with the brand. For this the interviewees said that story and emotionality are excellent tools and brand personality should be thoroughly considered as well. Story and emotionality by themselves will not do as much, but when they successfully link the brand personality to the company values, the outcome is favorable.

My third recommendation is two-fold and it is about providing value for the audience. In the existing authenticity literature customer value is not as much discussed as it was in the interviews. However, indirectly it can be seen that if a brand is able to provide a person with means to reinforce their desired identity the brand then provides value for that person. For this to work, first a company needs to realize that it cannot satisfy everyone's needs. When deciding the foundation of the brand, a part of it is to decide, who the target customer group is. With that in mind the company then has to aim all its communications to that target group, can the audience truly hear the voice from all the noise. The second phase of maximizing value for the audience is about having a realistic vision and patience/perseverance to go through with it. When the brand knows its target audience well enough, it can, with time, become the definitive expert in its field/industry. When combined with understandable/simple marketing and communications the target audience will definitely take notice and receive the value that is intended for them.

The final recommendation in enhancing brand authenticity is to provide the audience with the ability to influence the brand and simultaneously build even more trust. The ability to influence the brand is also not as much discussed in the existing literature. However, as people purposefully link objects and experiences to the stories of their self (Arnould and Price, 2000) and when they get really attached to a brand, that brand in a way becomes a part of them. And since it is possible that even people's "true self" can change (Lehmann et al., 2019) people likely want the brands, to which they are most attached, to change with them. In order to create this, a company must accept that its brand cannot always stay the same. It needs to adjust the brand over time in order to stay relevant to the target audience (or in extreme case even accept that the target audience has changed and adjust the brand to answer to that target audience's needs). The brand needs to be transparent and open about these modifications in order to remain trustworthy for the audience and those changes need to show in the products, communications, employee's actions and partnerships as well. When done correctly the audience will become even more attached to the brand when they know that the brand will stay a part of their identity, even when their identity might change.

7.2.2 How to avoid pitfalls of inauthenticity

I have two recommendations for things that should be avoided in branding in order to not become inauthentic in the eyes of the target audience. They both are mostly about communications, yet the root cause can be found in the internal operations of the brand. The first recommendation is about superimposing authentic image of the brand to the audience,

without having proper fundamentals nailed down. The audience can often see through this very quickly since the message is often not aligned with everything else. For example, nowadays brands often make sustainability claims without having done anything sustainable prior, leading to the audience right away questioning everything else they do, and thus leading to inauthentic evaluations. The mistake is made when not considering if the new claims are aligned with the brand's prior actions and if they match well enough with the company's values. New claims can be made for a brand if they match the values and if they fit in the realistic vision of the brand.

The second pitfall to avoid in building brand authenticity is hiding mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable and trying to hide them will always come off as inauthentic. This also can stem from not following the chosen values or the realistic vision and ending up doing something that the audience does not like. For example, a brand might overpromise and later find out to be unable to deliver on that promise. This can be mostly avoided by properly keeping the values and realistic vision in everyone's mind often enough. Yet, as mistakes are inevitable, the real challenge is how to react to the mistakes. Hiding them leads to inauthentic evaluations (as the mistakes will most likely come out sooner or later). However, there is always a chance to, in the best case scenario, even enhance authenticity with admitting mistakes, apologizing and humbly explaining where the mistake came from and how the brand will learn from it.

8 Conclusions

In general, my research offers valuable insight into how authenticity can and should be leveraged for branding in startups. When the markets are getting more and more crowded with brands, consumers seek cues beyond features and promises to justify their purchases. Brands that can help consumers to strengthen their identities and demonstrate their values are becoming increasingly preferable.

Both the existing literature and the interviews put large emphasis on consistency in building an authentic brand. It was deemed extremely important that everything that an audience can see about the brand is aligned with each other and with the brand's values. Besides consistency, communication styles can both enhance and hinder authenticity. For example, emotionality and story can enhance authenticity, but hiding mistakes can hinder it.

Internal operations behind brand were also emphasized. Besides deciding guiding values for a brand, strategic planning was also seen as crucial since, for example, without patience brand managers might lose faith before seeing results from focusing efforts on enhancing authenticity.

To make these findings suitable for brand managers to utilize in enhancing authenticity of a startup's brand, a model was proposed with connections to the audience and their motives and experiences. For example, when correctly deciding values for a brand, incorporating them to all

communications, products, employees' actions and partnerships, the audience will sense the consistency and begin to trust the brand more - leading to enhanced perceived authenticity.

8.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the existing literature by offering wide insights into how the evaluation of authenticity of a brand is composed. Brand authenticity depends on three categories of factors: 1) audience motives and experiences, 2) external inducements of a brand and 3) internal operations behind the brand. The study also gives perspectives to what specific factors in the categories are seen most important by startup brand managers, especially in what motives and experiences of the audience should be the target of the branding efforts.

The study also contributes to existing literature by forming connections with factors from the three categories, which helps to understand causations between branding efforts and audiences' authenticity evaluations.

Final contribution is the particular group of interviewees - startups with high focus on making a positive impact whose founders are very knowledgeable on the importance of consistency and authenticity for their brands. This target group almost seemed to have read a ton of material directly from the authenticity literature when reflecting the interviews, making you think that is authenticity something that has already been utilized a lot in branding but the term just has not been used as much yet.

8.2 Limitations

Despite providing valuable insights into leveraging authenticity in branding, the study has some limitations. Firstly, the number of interviewees was small - only eight people. Although the interviewees shared many similar insights, some things were not mentioned as often and it might be that some key insights did not come out at all.

Another limitation was the selection of companies that were presented by the interviewees. Firstly, six out of seven companies are startups. All the six startups have a mission for making a positive impact to the world. It could be that interviewing very different kind of companies, such as large corporations or companies not focusing on wide positive impact to the world, the results could be different.

Because of these limitations the results of the study are not directly generalizable, for example to big corporations and further studies are needed.

8.3 Implications for further research

The needs for further research derive both directly from the limitations of this study as well as from the needs of brand managers to understand even more about the subject. Firstly, the model of the study should be broadened with bigger sampling and other types of companies. This could unveil even more factors that affect brand authenticity in the eyes of the audience -

what other triggers there are with the audience that makes them see a brand as authentic, what other inducements does the brand has that influence the evaluation and what other internal operations should a company focus on to enhance brand authenticity.

Secondly, when the model has been broadened it should be tested quantitatively in varying contexts - namely outside startups as well as outside companies with missions for wide positive impact. For example, longitudinal studies that follow-up brands and how they enhance authenticity for a longer time period would be valuable in providing insight to what actually works and what does not.

More research could also be made in: 1) how much does the value the audience gets affect authenticity evaluation - is it necessary for people to be able to get personal value out of a brand in order to see it as authentic and is there a correlation - the more value the person gets the more authentic the brand looks for that person, 2) whether a brand should or should not adjust itself over time (since there is controversy in the existing literature), 3) how much is awareness a requirement - is there a certain measurable "amount" of awareness that needs to be reached in order for authenticity to increase brand value, and 4) how the value of authenticity for a brand can be measured.

Final area for further research is factors that hinder authenticity. Only two things came out in my interviews that are also supported in the existing literature. However, there most likely are

more and should be studied in order for brand managers to be able to avoid pitfalls that negate every good effort they do for enhancing brand authenticity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Interview Structure

So the reason why I'm interviewing you is that I'm doing my Master's Thesis on brand authenticity and I found your brand very interesting and suitable for my subject.

My own background has been in sales and marketing as well as a little bit of coding and I've recently become interested in branding while working at the company Ambronite. That was the spark for my thesis and with my supervisor the subject became quickly about brand authenticity to narrow down the topic enough.

So, why don't you tell me a bit about your background - where do you work now, what steps have you taken to get there, what have been the biggest learning experiences along the way?

What's the story behind your current company?

What are some of the greatest decisions you have made regarding your current company's brand?

How about some of the worst decisions?

What do you see as the biggest value of a brand for a business?

How do you think that value can be measured?

What do you see as building blocks of successful branding?

How do you see those correlating to the main value of branding?

How would you define authenticity of a brand?

(Talk about the definition so that you both are on the same page)

Do you see authenticity as one building block of branding?

What do you see as the biggest benefits of brand's authenticity? How does it correlate to the business value of branding?

Do you see your brand as authentic? How?

Has authenticity been a factor that you consider when managing your brand? What are the main factors that you consider when making branding decisions?

Can you recall some decisions you've made in the past that made your brand more (or less) authentic?

Do you remember seeing other brands do decisions that made them look more (or less) authentic?

What do you see as the most potential threats to your brand's authenticity?

How about when considering your entire brand - are there more threats than when considering authenticity only?

Do you see authenticity as something that not all brands need to consider? Or is it universal?

Does every brand need to stay loyal/true to some values?

Do you think it's worthwhile to focus on building authenticity for a brand?

If you would coach a startup on branding, how would you go about it? When would authenticity become a focus?

Appendix 2 - Interviewees

Participant number	Gender	Age group	Startup or Agency	Role in the company
1	M	30-35	Startup	Chief Executive Officer
2	M	25-30	Startup	Founder
3	M	35-40	Agency	Employee
4	M	45-50	Startup	Founder
5	M	25-30	Startup	Chief Strategy Officer
6	M	40-45	Agency	Founder
7	M	30-35	Startup	Founder
8	M	35-40	Startup	Founder