

Identifying Cues that Indicate Authenticity in Brand Storytelling Advertisements

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Abstract

Authentic brand storytelling advertisements have proven to be successful in elevating a brand's likability and consumer purchase intent. However, cues within these ads that indicate authenticity to consumers have yet to be identified. This research used focus groups to uncover consumer definitions of authenticity and identify what cues in brand storytelling advertisements signal authenticity to audiences. This study uncovered four patterns in advertisements that lead to perceived authenticity: consumer relatability, messaging indicating action, an appeal to empathy, and company self-awareness. This study benefits marketers and the advertising industry by identifying cues that help creators develop authentic brand stories.

I. Introduction

Advertising has long been a productive communications tool within companies' marketing portfolios to drive consumers to purchase products or think in certain ways about brands. From sales announcements to comical or dramatic scenarios, ads fill our screens, televisions, and mailboxes, exposing the average American to approximately 5,000 ads per day (Simpson, 2017). Due to this oversaturation, traditional advertising methods have become less effective in connecting with consumers. Brands needed to better relate with their audiences and differentiate themselves from competitors, particularly due to the shift in purchasing power to millennial and Generation Z buyers. These two demographic groups care deeply about brand values and want to support companies that share their views. Further, they do not want to support brands that do not reflect their values. A study done by *PR Daily* found that 83% of Millennials want to purchase from companies that align with their values (Kitterman, 2020). In order to relate to these audiences, companies had to find a way to communicate their brand values and-positions on social issues to their consumers. This resulted in the rise of using brand storytelling as a more genuine form of advertising.

This kind of advertising uses a creative approach and a narrative structure to tell a story or convey a non-product focused message. These ads can be used to reveal a more in-depth and meaningful expression of a brand, often taking a stance on social issues. Rather than directly selling a product, these ads indirectly sell their brand through stories that reinforce the company's values or role in driving social change forward. This phenomenon was first introduced in the 1960s during the creative revolution as advertisers began to use a "soft sell" approach that indirectly promoted their products with more subtlety and nuance. Over time, this

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strategy continued to grow as companies took greater creative liberties to tell deeper and more meaningful stories behind their brands.

A company that has been an industry leader in this phenomenon is Nike, with its brand stories featuring Colin Kaepernick kneeling in protest of police brutality. The series of ads were released in 2016 and featured the tagline, “Believe in something, even if it means risking everything,” (Papenfuss, 2019). These advertisements surprised the industry with their willingness to confront a major controversial issue. The ad focused on the story, emphasizing Nike’s belief in equality and only acknowledged the brand and logo at the end. While it was met with some controversy, Nike saw a \$6 billion increase in revenue and a 5% increase in its stock price in the quarter after the advertisement was released. This further underscored the power of storytelling, communicating brand values, and a belief in a narrative structure. Other brands would follow Nike’s lead and create similar storytelling ads.

While this kind of advertising can be extremely effective, authenticity is a key determinant in whether or not this communication will be well received. The messaging is reflective of a brand’s identity, so it needs to be genuine and representative of the brand’s or company’s beliefs and values. Authentic brand storytelling can drive brand loyalty and increase sales, while inauthentic brand storytelling can be detrimental to a company, often damaging its reputation and consumer support. The need for authenticity is generally understood by advertisers, yet many brand storytelling advertisements or films fall short. This research seeks to identify the cues in brand storytelling ads that indicate authenticity and the patterns in these communications that make them successful.

II. Literature Review

Prior research has been conducted on brand storytelling effectiveness and why its ability to showcase brand values is beneficial. Furthermore, researchers have examined what authenticity means and why consumers look for authenticity in the brands they purchase. Scholars highlight this important connection between brand storytelling and authenticity and the role this plays in the ultimate effectiveness of advertisements.

Conceptualizing Brand Storytelling

Brand storytelling has made a significant impact on the advertising industry and the way in which marketers convey their brand messages to audiences. This kind of communication follows a narrative form in order to communicate a brand’s values or positioning, often focusing on the ethical, social, or moral meaning behind the brand (Rush, 2015). By transporting audiences into a narrative-based world, consumers are generally more engaged, thus are more likely to create a positive association with the brand and to be more favorably disposed to brand purchase (Chiu, Hsieh, & Kuo, 2012). The fact is that consumers are more likely to purchase a brand to which they feel emotionally attached.

Storytelling provides the ability to form emotional connections by humanizing the traditional advertisements consumers typically view. In being genuine, emotional, and even nostalgic in their brand communications, advertisers are able to get consumers to connect (Rush, 2015). According to *Ad Age*, people no longer want to feel sold to, but rather they want to do business with companies “that are authentic, that stand for something meaningful, and that demonstrate these ideas in everything they do,” (Heidersbach, 2019). The narrative form of storytelling allows companies to demonstrate their deeper values to a consumer.

It follows then that marketers are more successful when the consumers’ needs and wants drive their advertising strategies (Ambiola, 2009). Storytelling allows brands to show consumers their story, values, and product benefits in a way that does not seem forceful. Being able to communicate a deeper side of brands beyond product attributes or benefits advertising gives businesses a compelling competitive advantage in the market by allowing them to differentiate themselves (Ambiola, 2009). However, the most important part of brand storytelling is relying on ethos (Rush, 2015). If a brand is not viewed as credible, its storytelling will not achieve the previously-referenced positive effects, making authenticity vital in these advertisements.

Effectiveness of Brand Storytelling

Brand storytelling is a key communication tool for establishing deeper connections with audiences. Consumers naturally seek out brands that provide more than just products or services. The narrative structure of these advertisements tends to be an effective form of communication because it ties messaging in with emotions, providing deeper meaning (Smith & Wintrob, 2013). Furthermore, purchasing decisions involve key character traits such as curiosity, honesty, and flexibility. The ability for storytelling to communicate these traits makes a brand more personable, and can move the brand higher as a consumer's purchasing choice. More importantly, it makes a brand easily recognizable and memorable (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010).

By connecting brand elements, such as a name or logo, with important values, it is more likely for the brand to resonate in consumers' minds (Hart, 2017). However, brand story advertisements are not effective by themselves. These ads must build off the brand positioning already held by a company, and be supported by various materials promoting the same messaging (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2020). While brand storytelling is supported by a substantial amount of research showing its effectiveness, there is a need of authenticity for brand storytelling to resonate.

Defining Authenticity

Authenticity derives from the Greek roots "autos" meaning "self," and the "hentes" meaning "doer," implying something that is in the control of its original creator (Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, 2012). In a more modern sense, the word has come to be synonymous with words such as real, genuine, and actual (Tran & Keng, 2018). Thus, being authentic translates to trustworthiness, as it indicates a lack of falsity.

It is very difficult to provide a set of rules for what makes something authentic because the way we perceive authenticity is subjective. People assess authenticity based on their own personal experiences and views (Lewis & Bridger, 2000). However, general cues that reinforce a continuance of historic practice are believed to be authentic (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). People trust the things they know, so a connection to the past can help indicate truth. This suggests that authenticity leads to believability, which is why it is so important for advertisers to create authentic communications.

Connection of Authenticity in Brand Storytelling

As covered previously, brand storytelling can be a very effective advertising tool, but in order for it to be successful, authenticity needs to be clear in its communication. In recent years, there has been a rise in consumers who are purposefully searching for authentic brands (Tran & Keng, 2018). People are now taking a brand's values into consideration before making a purchasing decision. Values can be conveyed through brand storytelling. However, small inconsistencies in these ads can undermine an audience's perception of their authenticity. Therefore, the message being communicated must be genuine and not simply a marketing tactic (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008).

As the desire for authenticity from consumers grows, it is important for marketers to downplay their commercialization and put a greater focus on who they are. By emphasizing their long-term values, brands are able to position themselves as "authentic," separating themselves from purely financial motives (Beverland, 2005). Brand storytelling acts as a vehicle for showcasing these values to an audience. In fact, it has been shown that displaying authenticity to viewers helps a brand legitimize its products and services and be perceived as having increased market value (Tran, & Keng, 2018).

This relates to the individual way people judge brands. Consumers like to feel emotionally connected to their purchases. They seek out advertisements that ensure their purchasing choices lead to self-authentication (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). Therefore, inauthentic brand communication will not translate to driving consumer purchase intention. On the contrary, brand storytelling that feels authentic allows consumers to form a personal expression of identity by choosing a brand that expresses its values, providing community membership with other consumers who share these virtues (Beverland, 2005).

However, authenticity or inauthenticity is not necessarily explicitly clear in every brand story. As noted earlier, consumers determine authenticity based on their own prior experiences in a subjective manner (Chiu, Hsieh, & Kuo, 2012). According to one study, some researchers use the term "believability" when discussing the extent to which advertising inscribes confidence in its authenticity (Chiu, Hsieh, & Kuo, 2012). Therefore, advertisers must work to create brand communications that feel authentic to as many people as possible, which is why having a brand's core values rooted in the story is so important.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a theory often used in advertising research to understand how perceptions of audiences change based on the information they are receiving from actual advertisements. There is an expected association between a consumer establishing a belief and positive cues in communications (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In brand storytelling, cues are expressed to consumers based on their brand values in attempts to convince audiences of their messaging. Based on the ELM theory, the brain interprets incoming information subjectively, which then determines how a consumer personally interprets the message.

The greater elaboration of the message, the more likely it is that an attitude will change or develop (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Authentic messages are likely to be received positively, helping shape a favorable belief about a brand. This creates a connection between a consumer and a company, increasing both brand loyalty and purchasing intention.

Beyond this, the model shows that the quality of an argument is the biggest influence on changing attitudes. The model also explains how for both the peripheral and central routes, if the communication presented is not deemed relevant by the viewer, then persuasion will not be successful (Manca et al., 2020). Authenticity is a key factor in both relevance and quality in communication. According to ELM, if visuals take a central route to persuasion, durable behavior change can take place (Manca et al., 2020). Thus, strong, authentic advertisements can follow this model and are likely to be persuasive to audiences.

Prior research has shown the important connection between brand storytelling and authenticity and why it is vital for brands to be genuine in their advertisements. However, previous research is lacking in identifying what cues might be included in brand storytelling that indicate this authenticity to consumers. This study attempts to identify these cues and develop a guide for future advertisers to use in creating authentic brand stories.

Purpose and Research Questions

In order to identify these cues, the researcher conducted focus groups to provoke in-depth discussion to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What do consumers perceive authenticity to be?

RQ2: Are there patterns or cues included in brand stories that convey authenticity to audiences?

Through scholarly research, brand stories have been determined to be an effective form of advertising, but scholars have yet to identify what cues in these advertisements indicate authenticity to audiences. To identify what patterns are included in successful stories, the researcher first needs to uncover what consumers actually identify authenticity to be. This research is important to the marketing industry as brand storytelling is becoming an increasingly popular form of advertising, and it is necessary for marketers to understand how to properly portray their messaging. Furthermore, younger generations are evolving into the purchasing majority, so this research will specifically identify which cues signal authenticity to college-aged consumers and young professionals.

Implications of brand storytelling can be significant. Advertisements that are received positively can greatly increase the company's position in the industry, sales, and consumer loyalty. However, if an advertisement is perceived negatively, a company's reputation can be severely damaged causing it to decrease in both likeability and purchases. Identifying cues in brand communications that portray authenticity can act as a guide for marketers to follow when creating their advertisements. This will help ensure that creators are making brand communications that will resonate with audiences and come across as genuine. If successfully created, these brand stories can help differentiate a company among competitors and increase its consumer base.

III. Methods

This research was conducted via three focus groups consisting of three to four participants each. Prior research has determined that focus groups of less than eight participants are effective for generating meaningful research (Asquith, 1997). Participants for this study were female, 18-22 years in age, and studying various majors at multiple universities. Convenience sampling was used in this study, with all participants being contacted individually by the researcher to participate in the focus group. A qualitative approach was used allowing the researcher to gather in-depth learning from focus group participants' conversations, including personalized reactions to various brand storytelling approaches and techniques. These participant exchanges generated an understanding of their individual interpretations of authenticity and its meaning (Lederman, 1990).

Each focus group began with a discussion centering on the participants' personal favorite brands, the brands' appeal, and what could cause participants to break their brand loyalty. Next, participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions that gauged their general interest in what they look for in advertisements, their liking of brand storytelling, and their interpretation of authenticity. For purposes of this study, brand storytelling advertisements were defined as any video advertisement with a narrative structure, surrounding a social issue theme and not direct product promotion.

Three brand stories were then shown to the group. The first ad was *Why Patagonia is Fighting for Public Lands* from Patagonia, which featured the founder's story about the need to protect public lands. The second ad was *The Best a Man Can Get* from Gillette, a piece that called out society for toxic masculinity, challenging audiences to take a deeper look at their own actions as males in society. The final advertisement was *You Can't Stop Us* from Nike. This story featured dozens of athletes fighting through hardships, with a voiceover describing how we are all united through hard challenges including a national pandemic and police brutality. All three of these advertisements followed the accepted guidelines of brand storytelling and all were centered on a social-change message.

After each advertisement, participants were asked to complete Likert-scale questions regarding how much they enjoyed the advertisement, how likely they were to purchase from the company, and how authentic they felt the ad to be (1 - least likely to 5 - most likely). The moderator then prompted the participants with open-ended questions to further gauge their perceptions of the advertisement and how authentic they felt it to be. These questions launched further discussions on authenticity cues and how the messaging resonated with participants. Some sample questions include: *How would you personally define authenticity? How important is it for you to purchase from a brand that you view as authentic? What about this advertisement felt authentic to you? Which of the shown advertisements felt the most authentic and why?* At the completion of each focus group, participants were asked to compare all three advertisements in terms of likability and their perception of authenticity in order for the researcher to identify any patterns or connections between the cues included and perceived authenticity.

All responses were recorded with permission from participants involved. All participants were protected under Institutional Review Board guidelines and signed a confidentiality agreement so their names will not be disclosed in this research.

Some limitations of this research included the sampling approach. All participants were located using convenience sampling, which limited the study to people only directly reachable by the researcher. Thus, the sample lacked diversity in location, race, and gender. Furthermore, this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing all focus groups to be held virtually. This could have had an impact on the conversational flow of the group and participants' willingness to answer questions.

IV. Findings

The focus groups provided a number of insights about authenticity and the cues that convey it in brand communications. To begin, participants showed a pattern in how they defined authenticity. Participants used synonyms such as "genuine," "real," and "original" when describing something as being authentic. Regarding company authenticity, respondents emphasized the idea that all actions a company take should be reflective of its primary message or mission. Participants reinforced this by saying a company's values should

be consistent throughout all parts of its business, from the actions taken by the CEO to the manufacturing of products to distribution. As one participant stated: "(as a company) ... you should have one mission, one purpose, and everything you do, every action you take, should further that purpose." This supported the idea that for a company to be authentic, consumers believe its actions need to be consistent with the messaging they are conveying.

A second way audiences define authenticity was the idea of uniqueness. Respondents said they felt authenticity was about creating something new and "not following what everyone else is doing." Being able to differentiate their brand from competitors and develop a unique identity was key in the way participants viewed authenticity. These perceptions on authenticity are important when considering the following conclusions.

When identifying cues that indicate authenticity, four major patterns emerged: the ad's ability to relate to consumers, messaging that indicated action, the use of empathy to connect with consumers, and a company's own self-awareness.

First, participants felt the advertisements were most authentic when they could relate to the content. A vital part of this was identifying with the individuals playing a role within in the brand story. The more diverse the storytelling pieces were, the more genuine audiences perceived it to be. For example, in the Nike commercial, people of all races, genders, abilities, and sports were represented. Respondents felt this was an indication of authenticity as it was inclusive to all groups, ensuring that every audience member could feel represented and connect to the people on the screen.

Ability to relate extends beyond physical appearance. Many participants felt Yvone Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia, was the most authentic of the individuals in three ads because they perceived him to be an everyday person rather than a celebrity or public figure. Although Chouinard is a notable member in business, he was not recognizable to any of the members in the focus groups, all of whom perceived him as an "every day consumer." None of the focus group participants were in his age demographic, but they could relate to him as being a typical consumer, unlike the celebrities in the Nike commercial or the actors in the Gillette ad. One respondent said: "He didn't sound scripted. It seemed like he was just having a conversation, which is authentic." Participants felt Chouinard was a person with whom they could have a genuine discussion rather than a company representative trying to sell them a product. Another respondent even said Chouinard reminded her of her grandfather, which she felt made the commercial more believable to her.

In contrast, some participants had more difficulty relating to the Nike commercial due to the lack of normalcy represented. One respondent noted: "You can't really relate to these big names; like people are going through a lot and (its tagline is) 'You Can't Stop Us,' but sometimes you can stop us." The inability to relate to professional athletes during a time of a national pandemic made the ad seem less authentic to some. Overall, the ability for audiences to connect with the people appearing or speaking in commercials is a significant indicator of authenticity. As mentioned in the literature review, authenticity is an individualized perception. Therefore, if consumers cannot personally relate to the ad, it is unlikely they will find the messaging to be genuine.

Beyond relatability, specific messages contained within the advertisements that encouraged action were a significant cue of authenticity. For example, the Patagonia ad ended with a phone number allowing consumers to learn more about public lands. Along with this, the Gillette ad ended with a website link that led to a site providing more information about the nonprofits to which it is donating. Participants felt that both of these action items demonstrated that the companies were contributing or making a difference beyond just mere words. One participant asserted: "Spreading the message is good, but what's behind it is most important." This comment reinforced the idea that a message without action would not represent a true brand value of the company. Another participant echoed this same thought: "Any time a commercial is calling for action, that isn't just 'buy our product,' it feels pretty authentic." This emphasized how providing an audience with actual next steps to follow, that are not based around monetary goals, makes the message seem real. Overall, participants agreed that if companies can show how they are supporting the issues they are communicating, then their advertisements feel much more authentic. In contrast, the Nike commercial ended with an inspirational tagline, "You Can't Stop Us," but lacked any overt call to action for audiences to follow through on its messaging. While the ad was still perceived positively, participants agreed it was less authentic than the other two. Therefore, companies demonstrating actionable follow-through beyond standard advertisement messaging is a key indicator for authenticity.

A third pattern identified through this research was the brand story's appeal to empathy. In order for audiences to trust an ad, they need to feel an emotional connection to the message. Throughout all the focus group discussions, participants referenced "feeling moved" or "touched" when discussing authenticity. In reference to the Patagonia advertisement, one participant shared: "Having him with soft music in the background pulled on my heart strings." The production technique of embedding the story within an inspirational soundtrack helped the ad appeal to participants' emotions, thus increasing its believability. A second participant echoed this saying, "I feel like if [the ad] pulls at your heart strings, I find that to be more authentic." The ability to move a viewer helps the messaging of the advertisement resonate, so it is more likely to feel real to the audience. This pattern was clear in responses from multiple participants. Another said: "I liked the one that was emotional, showing the boys that are younger being influenced by what we see and watching them grow up to be the men of tomorrow. I think that one was very powerful." Referring to the Gillette ad, the storytelling piece felt genuine to respondents because of its strong emotional appeal.

Respondents also recognized that the use of empathy can be an effective marketing and communication technique used in advertising. Marketers understand this emotional connection can drive people towards action. However, because the ads shown in the focus group were encouraging positive action, participants felt it was a genuine use of emotion. One respondent said in regard to the Gillette ad, "Since the message was about changing your mindset, they used emotion in a way that would get you to do that. Sometimes companies use emotion to prey on you to buy their products, but I think they did it in a responsible way." As referenced earlier, if an advertisement has an action item promoting a positive change, it is likely to be well received by consumers. In the Gillette example, the combination of action and emotion worked together to create an authentic advertisement.

Lastly, participants revealed that a company's own self-awareness is a key indicator for authenticity in advertising. Many advertisements that tell stories about brands often reflect major societal topics, so, it is important for companies to approach these issues from a place of understanding and recognize their role in the issues. Participants felt the Nike advertisement was authentic due to its ability to bring light to current problems such as COVID-19, racial biases and gender inequality, even if it might offend some viewers. One participant said: "Showing everything that's going on and not picking and choosing; not excluding one because someone might not agree, is staying true to themselves." Respondents felt this demonstrated the messaging was truly authentic because the brand is being transparent on the number of issues occurring in society rather than trying to "sugarcoat" or hide negative topics. For example, Nike did this in a way that did not interfere with its goal of uniting audiences. Another participant said: "I think it is really important the commercial is centered around COVID which can bring a lot of people down, but this commercial was very uniting and empowering." By incorporating a major issue such as a global pandemic, Nike showed its audience that the brand is not afraid to speak out on certain topics even if it could be perceived negatively. In this case, respondents translated the messaging as being authentic because it showed awareness and addressed this major issue.

This also extends to a company holding itself accountable for their prior actions. The Gillette advertisement was based on the company's original slogan, "The Best a Man Can Be" and challenged society to consider whether or not men had truly been acting in the best of their abilities. Participants felt that the brand's recognition of a fundamental issue among its primary audience demonstrated authenticity in its messaging. One participant said: "We don't see many things directed towards men to hold themselves accountable. It was refreshing to see, and it made me want to keep watching." Another participant agreed saying, "It shows humility and shows their ability to recognize past occurrences where men weren't living out their brand." Gillette's taking on such an important topic despite the potential for alienating its primary audience, demonstrates the brand's concern and care about the cause rather than simply driving profits.

Gillette also took this one step further by directly acknowledging its own role in perpetuating toxic masculinity. In the brand story ad, the brand shows one of its original advertisements being broken through, recognizing its prior role in supporting and perpetuating the issue. The exchanges among the research participants indicated that they appreciated this level of accountability, which further solidified the authenticity of the brand and its messaging. One respondent emphasized that "recognizing what they did that is wrong in the past is showing how authentic they are with what they're trying to do in the future. They want the people who buy their products to think that way also." Gillette's self-awareness of the role it can play in changing masculine culture helps its messaging appear real and more authentic.

Overall, there is no established checklist for companies to use to make an authentic brand storytelling advertisement. However, if brands incorporate speakers who can relate to the intended audience, messages that drive action, appeals that encourage empathy, and approaches that reflect the brands' self-awareness, then those brands and their messaging are likely to resonate with audiences as being genuinely authentic.

V. Discussion

This research discovered an apparent connection between authenticity and the likability of advertisements. The factors that led to audiences enjoying an ad, such as relatability and the emotional connection, are also factors that contribute to perceived authenticity. This important association reveals the importance of authenticity in brand storytelling, as positive brand attitudes drive purchase intention (Chiu, Hsieh, & Kuo, 2012). However, it is important to note that audiences are aware that brand storytelling ads are still a marketing technique. Even if a brand story comes across as authentic, it does not mean that consumers will automatically perceive the entire brand to be authentic. One participant shared: "A lot of brands are good at marketing and can trick us into thinking they are authentic but might not be." Participants agreed that the authenticity of a brand goes deeper than just the advertisements they see. As referenced previously, the actions that a company takes need to be consistent with its overall messaging. One respondent referred to this saying; that authenticity is "big picture," meaning it is about more than only the advertisements. Therefore, even if an advertisement is both liked and considered genuine, it does not necessarily translate to consumers believing that the entire company is authentic.

Beyond this, patterns within the focus group discussions reflect that actively supporting authentic brands is much more challenging than avoiding purchases from inauthentic brands. Participants emphasized that they want their purchases to come from authentic brands, but they do not go out of their way to weigh the brand's or company's authenticity before purchasing. One participant explained: "I don't do the research to actually investigate the companies, but if something bad is made public then I would 100% not buy from them." Therefore, while authenticity plays a major role in affecting purchasing habits, it does not have as strong an impact on purchasing as negative publicity, which demonstrates being out of authentic alignment. It is more common for negative events to be seen in the media than positive events, therefore, it is likely that more consumers will know of a company's bad reputation than another company's positive one. Another respondent asserted: "(We) have so many options, so it's really easy for a company to do something that would immediately make me want to stop buying from them, and usually it's ethical types of things." This reinforced the idea that an inauthentic action from a brand would lead to a loss in purchases and consumer loyalty.

A primary example of this can be seen in the 2017 Pepsi advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner easing tensions between protestors and police officers by sharing a can of Pepsi. This advertisement was insensitive to the highly prevalent issue of police brutality and minimized the severity of the situation (Lewin, 2017). The aftereffects were significant, greatly hurting Pepsi's brand image and causing a loss in revenue. This is a strong example of consumers no longer wanting to support a brand that is inauthentic in its messaging.

Another trend uncovered during the research was that while participants might want to purchase from a brand seen as authentic, monetary limitations might inhibit their ability to support authentic brands. As mentioned before, participants defined authenticity to be a company being consistent with their values in all aspects of a business, including production and distribution. Fast fashion companies tend to often face public backlash for poor working conditions in the production of their goods. However, since all participants were college aged, their relative lack of spending money often limited their purchase choices, causing them to purchase from these brands rather than ones they know will be authentic in all of their manufacturing and marketing activities. One participant said: "I find it hard to be picky because I have little funds I can spend. As we get older we will have more disposable income to afford those more authentic products." Another participant shared frustration with the inability to purchase from brands she knows to be authentic: "Sometimes with a college income, we want to support these brands, but they might be more expensive, which is the one thing that would hold me back." The limit on spending money was the only reason brought up during the focus group discussions for not supporting an authentic brand.

This research supported the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). As introduced in the literature review, there is a connection between positive cues in advertising and a consumer developing a belief system (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The cues included in brand storytelling advertisements can help persuade audiences to develop a view that is consistent with the brands' messaging. Most brand storytelling ads promote a major social or political change. For example, the Patagonia ad in this research promoted the need to protect public lands. Based on the ELM, the positive cues in this ad would help shape an audience's view on land protection. This is a strong reason why brand storytelling has become such a phenomenon over the past few years. As referenced earlier, a strong emotional connection to an ad helps increase its perceived authenticity. Based on this idea, brand stories can encourage audiences to develop positions on various social and political issues, which in turn promotes deeper emotional connection to the brand.

VI. Conclusion

This research sought to identify what cues in brand storytelling advertisements indicate authenticity to consumers. With the recognized effectiveness of authentic advertisements and no existing guide for what makes an advertisement authentic, this research attempted to address this gap in the prior research. Specifically, this study revealed several cues that should help brands connect with consumers through their communication of sincere, compelling, and empathetic stories. While explicit directions or guides were not developed in this study, an overarching understanding of what consumers feel to be authentic was identified. Focus-group participants all agreed that authenticity was extremely important to their purchasing decisions, and four factors –relatability, messaging encouraging action, empathy and brand self-awareness – were important indicators of an authentic brand storytelling ad.

Future research could take these four identified cues and test for their presence through content analysis. The findings could be further enhanced by analyzing various brand storytelling ads to determine the connection between these cues and the level of the advertisements' success. In addition, conducting a similar study with a larger and more diverse subject group, and one-on-one interviews, could reveal a deeper understanding about authenticity and its connection to brand storytelling.

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