

Brand Encroachment on Sub-Cultural Space: Multiple Views of Authenticity

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Claims of authenticity are one of the key markers of post-modern marketing practice (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Rose and Wood 2005). Paradoxically, claims of authenticity may be tainted by contact with commercial motives and the mass market (Beverland 2005; Holt 2002; Kates 2004; Rose and Wood 2005). For example, in his study of gay sub-cultures, Kates (2002; 2004) identified that overt exploitation of community resulted in a loss of moral legitimacy, thus tainting brands and removing claims of authenticity. In contrast, brands gained moral stature through 'paying their dues' – essentially supporting the moral and political goals of the community as part of the community's fight for legitimacy. Such brands were legitimized and thus seen as authentic. Likewise Beverland's (2005) study of the luxury wine market identified the importance to claims of authenticity of downplaying commercial motives and marketing expertise. Instead, these brands gained value by emphasizing timeless traditions, links to place, and their place in history.

However, do all consumers attribute authenticity to brands that play down their commercial motives? A key debate within research on authenticity is whether authenticity is a global claim, or whether there can be multiple 'authenticities' (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Postrel 2003; Rose and Wood 2004). For example, Postrel compared objective and subjective claims of authenticity and noted that consumers may find a brand or product authentic if it delights, provides personal use value, is aesthetically pleasing, and/or reflects some inner personal truth. Likewise, Beverland's (2006) study of fine wine consumers identifies different interpretations of authenticity driven by product involvement and expertise.

This paper examines the reactions by sub-cultural members to targeted brand marketing activities. We identify four forms of authenticity based on multiple in-depth interviews with surfers, skateboarders and snowboarders. These are: authenticity as freedom (resulting in the rejection of brands *per se*); authenticity as belongingness (resulting in the adoption of brands that appear to be associated with the sub-culture); authenticity as excellence (resulting in the adoption of high-performance brands); and, authenticity through connection (resulting in the adoption of brands related to a specific place).

These forms of authenticity are moderated by sub-cultural involvement (defined as involvement with the focal activity of the sub-culture). For example, new sub-cultural members often attributed authenticity to brands trading on the image of the sub-culture (such as the surf brand Roxy) due to the belief this would make them appear an authentic member of the sub-culture (authenticity as belongingness). Likewise, former sub-cultural members would also adopt such brands in order to retain and project a desired self-image. In contrast, more experienced sub-cultural members often viewed such brands with contempt, seeing them as inauthentic because they did not make products directly associated with the sport's focal activity (authenticity as excellence), or were disconnected from local traditions (authenticity as connection), or were motivated purely by financial gain (authenticity as freedom).

Issues for research and anti-consumption practice are explored.

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